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eXotica no. 1

AN X FILES ADULT FANZINE

edited by Margaret A. Basta

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Oak Park, MI 48237-2805*

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THE GIRL WITH CATFISH EYES

by

Laura Trise Basta-Sandler

The catfish were following him.

Fox Mulder knew it. He walked the warped boardwalk along the Belleville River and stared west at the dipping sun.

The catfish were large, scaleless and close to the ugliest bottom feeders Mulder had seen since a fluke or two. Over the generations, the fish were instinctively trained to trail in the shadows of those deities—bestowers of popcorn and Cheerios and pieces of ice cream cones.

He stopped strolling and deliberately looked down into his own lengthening shadow and saw the fish hesitate. Snouts and whiskers broke the surface of the river in several places.

"True junk food junkies," Mulder commented to no one.

He considered his dilemma...

"To tell... or not to tell..." Mulder sighed and looked back down at the fish.

One of the catfish reared its entire head out of the water, whiskers twitching.

"So how's your love life?" Mulder asked, rhetorically.

The fish stared up at him with brown eyes that were just slightly darker than the water she/he/it swam in.

Fox Mulder stuffed his hands into the pockets of his trenchcoats and considered his folly of talking to a catfish; not that the activities of the past twenty-four hours made talking to a catfish an unreasonable response.

Again he looked at his watch.

Dr. Dana Scully, M.D. was late.

His pocket phone chirped.

Praying that it was Scully delaying the inevitable, he flipped it open. "Mulder."

"Where are you?" Scully demanded.

Mulder took a deep breath. "Where I... told you I'd be—in Belleville."

"Belleville? I'm at the Holiday Inn in Windsor—"

"I... suspected as much. But I had to meet—"

"Do you come to me, or do I come to you?" she demanded.

Mulder took another deep breath, trying to contain rampant emotions. Abstractly, he noticed the fish were still staring at him, particularly the bolder one..

"I'll... come to you."

Scully sighed herself. "Good. I'm in no shape to... go out," and knew she sounded strained.

"It's about a forty-five minute drive, barring delays at the Windsor Tunnel—wait for me."

"Yes... Fox."

Mulder snapped his phone shut, inwardly cringing. She had sounded almost... lost.

Dana Scully traced the joint of her thigh to her pubic area and tried... tried desperately to remember.

She was a clinical pathologist, a medical doctor with more than a passing experience with evidence.

The evidence at the moment told her she'd had one helluva night of... passion.

As clinically detached as she could muster, Dana Scully analyzed her first piece of evidence and its surroundings. Her first piece of evidence were the ruined sheets with multiple white, chalky stains.

She was in a standard *Holiday Inn* room with all the prerequisite fake bad art prints on the walls, and geometric prints on the comforters. The veneer furniture was unchipped and relatively new, suggesting a recent upgrade. But nothing else sprang to mind.

Her second piece of evidence were her sore muscles... in areas that have little to do with normal cross-training exercises.

She closed her eyes, trying to remember.

Nothing came.

If she had been any other woman, she might have panicked. She had awakened with no memory but with the results of a wild, salacious night.

Unhappy with what her survey was telling her, Dr. Dana Scully sat upright in her queen-size bed. "Mulder..." she whispered almost as an anthem.

Fox Mulder... Spooky Mulder would make it right... For an inexplicable reason, she was warmed with the thought...

◆

Mulder clutched his cellular phone.

He sighed.

His options were so limited, he didn't know where to turn.

Dana Scully solved his problem by ringing him again. "Fox... where are you?"

Mulder sucked in his breath as he There had been an edge of desperation to her voice he was not accustomed to.

"Scully...?"

"Nothing's changed, Mulder. Just keep the...

line open while you come to me."

Without wanting to, Fox Mulder winced at her probably inadvertent words. "Right there... Dana... forty-forty-five minutes. Tops."

"How..."

Instinctively Mulder raised his fingers. "Sshussh..."

The catfish reacted, particularly the one with eyes darker than the muddy waters of the Belleville River.

Almost dumbfounded by the fish, Mulder watched the fat, non-scaled fish circle at his feet.

Feeling he could sense their need, and the intensity of their begging he spread his hands. "Okay. I'll come back and feed you popcorn--so what do you think?"

The catfish that had caught his eye, bobbed her head.

Fox Mulder swallowed, hard, by the thoughts that came to him.

He shrugged them off and walked away to the Acura, silver, two door that was waiting for him...

◆

Dana Scully stood under the stream of hot water in the shower and knew she was destroying evidence.

Evidence.

She'd been around the block enough times to know when she'd had sexual relations with someone.

Semen samples.

She knew, with all the modes of a pathologist that whatever had happened with her had been... consensual.

There was no doubt.

No tearing.

No blood.

Obvious lubrication.

She... had been quite willing.

Dana Scully closed her eyes and ducked her

head under the shower spray and tried to remember who in the Detroit Metro area she would have jumped into bed with.

She considered her date.. it couldn't have been him...

The Assistant D.A., "Big" Bob Schulte had been, at best, a minor infatuation as an undergraduate. She had accepted his invitation to dinner in Greek Town, primarily to catch up on events of the past decade; dinner with "Big" Bob was better than sitting in a hotel room or joining Mulder who was intent on going to one of the Windsor casinos.

Dana Scully couldn't imagine him capable of seducing her.

So who had?



Mulder drove at fifty-five miles-per-hour, ignoring all the cars that passed him.

He had heard the jests that "I-94 indicated the speed..." He hadn't thought it real until he was on the highway. Michigan had become notorious as a state where the speed limits were ignored. He was actually quite surprised that this "folk tale" of the state was true.

Cars honked.

Drivers gave him the finger.

The instinct to retaliate and do likewise at about a hundred-and-twenty m.p.h. swelled in his veins.

Fox Mulder reminded himself as he passed the gigantic tire along I-94 and drove into downtown Detroit that he was being... unreasonable.

Then he got the next phone call...



"Your Mr. Schulte is considering filing assault charges against me," Mulder stated, almost nonchalantly when Scully opened her hotel room door.

Without speaking, she turned away from him and walked to the door wall and stared out at the stark, sparkling images of the Detroit sky line at dusk.

Mulder noted that she was not wearing her customary suit, but nondescript gray sweats, her still damp hair slicked back and the color of mahogany.

"I... seem to remember some of that," Dana said finally, still not looking at him.

Mulder peeled off his trench coat and tossed it on a chair. He walked around her high-heeled pumps which she had discarded last night, and approached her. "What... do you remember, Scully?" he asked carefully.

She turned so her profile was juxtaposed against the skyline. "So... you know I've had a... memory loss." Wryly, covering up her level of panic, Scully added, "was it aliens? Another abduction? Think there are any more microchips embedded in me?"

"Afraid not, Dana." Mulder forced himself to smile at her attempt at humor and stared at her eyes.

"Fox...?" she questioned, her eyes wide.

For a brief moment, Mulder stared into her baby blues and said, "for a moment--just an instant you reminded me of a catfish I knew..." and shook his head.

"Should I be flattered or filleted with the comparison?" she asked wryly.

"Flattered. I found this particular catfish rather... appealing."

Dana Scully shook her head. "You're impossible--" and got to the heart of the issue. She folded her arms across her chest. "I... you... we testified yesterday at the trial. When I realized that Schulte was part of the Prosecutor's team, he suggested we have dinner. I invited you to join us and you begged off.

"What happened, Mulder?"

Mulder considered a simple, direct answer that she had "fucked her brains out..." but didn't

think Dana Scully would appreciate it, sensing her current mood.

"Tell me everything you remember—"

"I just did. How—when did you get back together with 'Big' Bob and myself—you fought?" Scully knew she sounded testy, but she couldn't help herself. Her bed loomed behind Mulder, and there were just too many unanswered questions.

Fox Mulder reached the crux of his life... to speak the truth... or not to...

In retrospect, the decision was probably a given. He had spent his entire adult life seeking truth in all of its forms, *he couldn't start lying to his partner now...*

Mulder faced her squarely. "When... you came back to the hotel..."

Scully pressed fingers against her forehead, trying to remember.

She couldn't.

Uncharacteristically for him, Mulder stretched out his arms, and embraced her. "It's all right..." he murmured to her softly as she collapsed against him. "It's all right... I'll tell you everything..." and in his mind's eye, replayed the past twenty-four hours...

◆

The night had been cool. Mulder had stood on the deck that ran the length of the hotel staring off at the twinkling, brightly lit skyline of Detroit.

In his opinion, there were few skylines prettier, although some were more complex.

They had flown into Detroit Metro to testify at the trial of a drug dealer who was also a necrophilic. Putting a true piece of scum behind bars for a very long time, was a pleasure Mulder always enjoyed. Particularly one that would murder, then rape the crack-addicted women that owed him money.

He had considered "Big" Bob Schulte a

competent, if not imaginative prosecutor. The case was clearly high profile for the metro Detroit area and they had been mobbed.

Mulder had begged off of going to Greek Town with Scully and Schulte, although the local enclave of Greek culture and restaurants had always appealed to him. It had pleased him that Scully was willing to do something outside of the line of duty. Although he wasn't quite impressed with 'Big' Bob Schulte, the possibility that Scully might increase her social life was something that he considered a positive.

He had used the excuse of going gambling in Windsor and after having lost his allotted amount of funds, Mulder had returned to their hotel. He had insisted they stay in Windsor instead of downtown Detroit, purely for nostalgic reasons and Dana had agreed.

Mulder liked Windsor. To him, it was as if he had entered a time warp and had gone back in time twenty-thirty years. People were civil. Pleasant. You could walk the streets, dine in very cosmopolitan cafés and leave all cares behind.

After a night at the casinos, he had welcomed the stroll down Ouellette to Riverside Drive and finally through the park and over to their hotel. A warm spring night in Windsor was almost reminiscent of Paris, and he appreciated the culturally different charm.

On the wide deck of the Holiday Inn he had leaned on the railing, watched pleasure crafts go by and taken in the fishy, damp smells of the Detroit River and the incredible skyline.

Then on the deck below his, at ground level, he had seen Scully and Schulte saunter, going toward her hotel room.

Fox Mulder had been surprised. He had never expected Schulte to be Scully's type.

And then Dana Scully started climbing all over him.

In public, as if she didn't care, she massaged his fly, causing Schulte's immediate arousal.

The kiss she gave him would have had her

arrested, even in Windsor, the city reknown for it's totally naked bars.

Mulder knew his mouth was opened wide enough to allow every bug in the city to enter.

She assaulted her date... pressing him against the railing and causing him to struggle to just remain upright.

In public.

Knowing, instinctively, ignoring any surge of jealousy, Mulder knew there was something wrong—*truly wrong*.

Without thinking he ran down the deck toward the stairs, intent on stopping them.

By the time he reached the pair, Schulte was thoroughly involved in their love making and had turned about their roles and pushed Scully against the railing. With eager hands he ripped open the vest of her suit and fumbled with the front closure of her bra.

"No!" was all Mulder uttered.

It was as if he wasn't even there.

"No..." Mulder repeated and grabbed Schulte by the shoulder.

He spun.

Scully sighed. "Mulder... thank god you've come..." and launched herself at him, baring her breasts.

In his entire life he had never been more befuddled....

"I was thinking of you..." Scully stated, reasonably. "Schulte was a... substitute."

"Big" Bob Schulte punched Mulder.

Mulder, sucker punched went down and Schulte tumbled down on top of him.

True to his training, he managed to get Schulte off of him, staring, almost abstractly at Dana Scully bare breasts. *The nipples and areola were pinker than he had imagined...* As she was, with her shirt and vest opened, she was a true menace.

Schulte screamed. "No!" He shook his punching hand, as if in pain.

Mulder had no idea if his "No!" was because

of his interruption and his amateur fist-clenching with the thumb inside the curled fingers, or the fact he'd punched his lights out.

Ignoring the crumpled body, he went to Scully and grabbed her arms. "Scully—"

"Love me—" she breathed, as if Schulte's inert form didn't matter. "Love me... Fox—I need you..."

Having no idea how to handle the situation, except going by instinct, Mulder half-dragged, half-pushed her up the stairs to the upper deck and thrust her through the door wall of her hotel room.

Dana Scully tumbled through the door wall and staggered over to her queen-sized bed. She sprawled on it, legs splayed and looked beseechingly at Mulder. "Please... I need you..."

Mulder swallowed. Hard. He tried to ignore her bare breasts and locked the sliding wall door to prevent Schulte from becoming an uninvited guest. "What—"

Dana Scully shucked off her jacket, her vest, her shirt and her bra.

Mulder stared at her semi-naked form and tried and failed to control his instinctive reaction to a nymph presenting herself.

Dana Scully stretched out a hand.

What he wanted to do and what he did do were two different things. "Dana..." and swallowed really hard. "I have—"

"Fox..." she breathed. "My little Foxy—"

Mulder's head jerked back. "Dana—think. What did you have to drink?"

She propped herself up on an elbow.

Mulder noted that her breasts tilted in a most appealing way, and immediately scoured himself.

"Wh-what makes you th-think I h-had anything to drink?" Dana asked plaintively.

Feeling like he had been taking deep breaths all evening, Mulder tried to be reasonable. "Because... Scully—you're not yourself."

She slipped a hand between her legs.

Fox Mulder watched it disappear.

"I... need you."

"Schulte—Schulte—I'll be right back." Mulder backed off from the bed while all of his instincts screamed.

It was just wrong.

Leaving Scully looking quite befuddled and... horny, he backed up to the door wall and unlocked it. "Stay put," he cautioned.

Scully sat upright. "I'll take a shower." She smiled at him.

"Good idea," he managed to get out, as images of what the rest of her body looked like roared through him.

Fumbling with the handle, Mulder backed out onto the deck and looked around, as the cold, fish-tanged air of the Detroit River hit him.

At least what he breathed was sobering.

Double-time, he ran down the stairs to the lower deck, hoping against hope to find Schulte where he'd decked him.

He was gone.

Being logical, Fox Mulder stopped in his tracks and tried to think where an aroused man with a probably broken thumb and a busted nose would go after he picked himself up.

He went to the hotel bar.

"Big" Bob Schulte was not there.

Mulder scratched the back of his head and considered all the other possibilities. Schulte could have gone home. Schulte could have gone to some of the better Oriental restaurants that Windsor was so famous for. And Schulte could have also gone to one of the many totally nude strip joints around Ouelette Avenue.

He decided to go to the closest nude bar, not having the option of knowing Schulte's home address in the Pointes.

◆

Danny's was loud, raucous, hot and quite smokey. The condition of the club was what was

expected of it.

The silicon valleys and their associate mounds of femininity twirled and tossed in ways that were humanly impossible, but somehow the dancers were capable of achieving. Lap-dancing reached new lows.

Fox Mulder was reminded of his undergraduate years.

Fox Mulder suspected, in his gut, it was going to be a long night. When he spotted the Assistant D.A. with the Rudolf red nose and the double single malt scotch, he thanked whatever gods were guiding him.

He'd guessed right.

Schulte didn't even detect his presence until Mulder loomed over his table and grabbed a lapel. "What did you give her?"

The scotch in his mouth rolled out the sides of his lips. Schulte stared dumb-founded. "No—" he squeaked.

Mulder lifted him up off of his chair by his lapels. "What did you give her???"

The bouncer came over.

Mulder, instinctively knew when he was coming and dropped Schulte back on his chair. He flashed his badge and I.D. "F.B.I. and butt off." He instantly recognized he should have said "out," but the bouncer got the message. The two-hundred pound muscle-bound gargantuan grunted and took a step back.

Mulder didn't sigh with relief. He grabbed "Big" Bob Schulte again by his lapels. "Answer me--"

"I—I she took them willingly—"

"Answer me!"

Schulte took a look up into the fiercest brown eyes he had ever seen and instinctively blurted as self-preservation set in. "Roofies."

"Roofies...?" Mulder stared for a moment as noncomprehension set in. "Explain."

Schulte scrambled. "I... always had a 'hard on' for Dana, and she ignored me."

Mulder let go of his lapels and sat down

opposite of him.

Schulte adjusted his suit. Then without prompting, he continued. "I—I was just down in Mexico. I... picked up-up this tranquilizer—legal there. Mix it with alcohol—"

Mulder nodded his head. "I've read about them," he interrupted. "A psychotropic sedative that when mixed with intoxicants renders the recipient aroused with absolute memory... loss..." and stopped cold and stared at his cowering quarry.

Schulte nodded his head. "I—I couldn't resist. I'm sorry—"

"She'll do *anything* under their influence. I wanted that chance—" and Schulte broke off with a sob under Mulder's stare.

Mulder abstractly wondered how many single malt Islays the attorney had consumed.

Without a word he stood and left the gyrating bar...

◆

Dana Scully let the hot water stream through her legs. She let the hot water flow over her.

The warmth and soothing was a poor substitute.

Somehow, inherently she knew when Mulder entered her bathroom.

She cracked the shower curtain and stared at her partner in his suit. "Get rid of the clothes," she ordered.

"Scully..."

To Scully it sounded almost a plea. She widened the crack in the shower curtain. "What?"

Mulder stepped closer to the tub, ignoring the heat and humidity that pummeled him. She'd been in the shower for at least a half an hour.

He hoped she was sobering up.

"I need you, Fox..."

Mulder sighed and finally forced himself to consider his options.

She would be racked with insatiable desires

because of the drugs...

She wouldn't remember a single damn thing in the morning...

Fox Mulder's decision was surprisingly easy...

With controlled, deliberate movements he shucked his jacket, then his tie and shirt.

Scully gasped when she saw his bare chest, "Promise me, Dana," Mulder began simply. "Promise me you won't remember what happens next. Schulte—the pig—gave you 'roofies'. You're under the influence."

Scully ran her hands through her slicked hair. "I—I am—"

"Yes."

Scully turned her face to the tile and collapsed against it. "No..."

"How... can I help?" Mulder asked carefully, fully knowing the answer before he said it.

"Love me... if I don't remember tomorrow--it doesn't matter--"

"I'll know, if you don't remember."

Scully lifted her head from the wheat-beige tile of her bath. "Promise me—promise me you won't tell me if I don't remember--"

"I... can't do that."

"Yes you can!" Scully turned away from the tile and spread her arms revealing herself as "Venus Rising". "I... need you... now..."

Mulder again quelled his instinctive reaction. "I... can't..."

"Please—" Scully threw back the shower curtain..

Mulder reeled as if he had been hit. Seeing her through the curtain, as if it had been mufti, had been one thing—*in person was another...*

"Scully—I can't..."

"Yes you can—" She stepped out of the tub and knew with an instinctive feminine grasp she had completely befuddled him. "I won't remember—you've said that--I won't remember.

"Haven't you wondered? Haven't you fantasized--I have.

"Give in." She grasped his hands. "This is a 'win-win' situation."

Mulder swallowed really hard again. "How?"

"We.... get to fulfill our own fantasies... and in the morning I don't remember."

Mulder looked at her still wet-slicked body and how he desperately wanted to consummate his urges. "But I will."

A knowing smile quirked on her face. "I hear you're good at keeping secrets..."

"I still can't prom—"

Dana enveloped him. "Tell me... if I insist... *but now is now...*"

Instinctively his arms went around her damp shoulders. Knowing he was going against his grain, and remembering the last time he'd done so, he possessed her.

"Fox..." she breathed, feeling his arousal through his now quite damp trousers, she knew, instinctively she'd won.

"I am Jean-Luc Picard—I don't get involved with senior bridge members..." Mulder uttered almost as a mantra. "I am—"

"But he *did*. Her name was Nella." Scully kissed him, open-mouthed.

Mulder experienced her warmth, and the incredible amount of pleasurable shivers she instantly caused, and tasted *Aquafresh*.

He did battle with her tongue, and didn't quite know when she had undone his trousers, but knew immediately when she'd invaded his boxers.

Mulder groaned.

She stopped her invasion. "Mulder...?"

"I hate making love in a bathroom—nothing's comfortable. Not the sink—not these *Holiday Inn* standard tubs. You need a whirlpool for two." He stopped his commentary to kiss her cheek, and slid his lips to her ear.

Scully cocked her eyebrow, and instinctively trembled as Mulder found some of her favorite erogenous zones. "Then, I suggest we move to more comfortable ground."

His response was to slam open the bathroom door and tumble her through it toward the bed.

It would have been highly stimulating if they had made it. But Mulder's spin to Scully made her land short of the bed.

She fell with a bone-jarring thud just short of the mattress flounce.

Mulder landed on his knees. He went down on his hands gasping for breath and sanity. This wasn't.... quite what he'd ever fantasized with Scully.

Champagne... camp fire... a slab of ribs... s'mores... a double-sized sleeping bag and seclusion without cell phones had been his fantasy...

"Scul—Dana—I'm sorry."

Dana Scully started laughing.

Fox Mulder stared at her. He'd become appreciative and inured to her wry comments. He'd heard her studied, blasé laugh on many an occasion; he'd heard her giggle when she thought he was out of earshot; he'd heard her laugh with nervous relief—but *never* had he heard her just laugh for the sheer comedy of a moment.

Scully reared back her head, titan hair tumbling. "I'm the one trying to seduce you--"

"And a damned fine seduction it is—"

"Your coordination could improve."

Fox Mulder brushed back a tendril of her hair. "When it counts—it is excellent."

Scully collapsed and let out a series of giggles and laughs.

Mulder considered if it was the drug working in her system or his sounding like an ass. He decided on the latter.

Then Scully's hand touched his face. "Come on," she ordered simply. "I'm not in the mood for carpet burns."

"Then... allow me." Mulder stood and helped her to her feet.

She smiled her Botticelli smile. "After you." Dr. Dana Mulder, M.D., Special Agent, F.B.I. shoved her partner on the bed.

"Always better if it's after you," Fox Mulder murmured as she descended upon him.

Considering that reality was far better than any Lone Gunmen fantasy, Fox Mulder proceeded...

◆

Fox Mulder lay next to her, spooning her. He felt her knowing fingers entwine around his testicles and sighed against her sensitive, delicate touch.

Dawn was upon them.

"I'm getting sleepy," and Scully yawned.

"You're about to get a well-deserved sleep," Mulder stated, thinking he also needed one.

Scully lifted her head, her hair now limp and tousled. "Fox... about my request."

Mulder didn't have to ask for clarification. He traced her spine and felt her administrations to his genitals intensify.

"We've always... spoken the truth to each other. If... I insist... *tell me, please.*"

Mulder kissed the nape of her neck.

She released her hold on him and rolled over, moving a thigh over his. "Fox..." she gripped his shoulder. "We can't go on together as a team with this between us. You *must* tell me if it's appropriate."

Fox looked at her Botticelli features and the depth of her eyes and wavered against his resolve to never discuss this with her. "If... I deem it appropriate," he finally admitted.

Scully found his penis with knowing fingers and then a mouth, and did things, one more time to him that were beyond his fantasies.

When he had reciprocated and her cries had disturbed all the hotel guests on their floor, Mulder caressed all her body parts with great tenderness and withdrew from her.

Scully propped herself up on an elbow.
"Fox?"

"I have a meeting—in Belleville."

"Belleville? With whom?" She looked incredulously at him, trying to equate the half-resort town, half-hicksville with Mulder. "I know Belleville has a great river—scenery, but there's nothing of our case located in Belleville."

Mulder found his pants, grateful they'd dried. "Nothing to do with this case, Da—Scully."

"Then what does it have to do with?" She sat upright and, for a moment, considered bringing the sheets up over her breasts, and decided not to do so.

Mulder took in her image, swallowed hard and explained, minimally. "Years ago—when I was a kid—I was on a school trip in February. There was a blizzard—"

"Blizzard?"

"Blizzard—big blizzard. The bus we were on got stuck. We walked a mile along I-94 to the Belleville exit. The expressway was closed—motorists were stranded everywhere. A lot of them made it to Belleville."

"And...?" she cocked her eyebrow again.

"I walked into this... diner with twenty other kids. There'd been a Winnabago—with the logo 'Silver Bullet Band' in the parking lot. A group of musicians were jamming in this diner.

"We were cold and hungry." Mulder gestured. "We were scared."

"And...?"

"There was this... guy. He was playing his guitar and singing with members of his band. The waitresses were tapping spoons on sugar jars and even the elderly were listening to him." Mulder gestured, both arms in the air. "I heard... music that stirred my heart—music that caused me to... *believe...*" and he shook his head.

"What happened?" Scully asked softly.

"We all participated. We jammed for hours. Ended up in the lobby of the HoJo right next door. I slept with a blanket on the floor in front of the front desk, listening to him."

"And...?" Scully persisted.

"We meet—every year—anyone who can

make it."

"This isn't winter—it's May—"

"I know. We picked May Day—figured it was more logical than February."

Scully's eyes widened. "Every year?"

"He comes every year—twenty to fifty others do to. This is my... first time in a long time."

Scully finally drew the sheets up over her breasts. "That's where you're going?"

"Yes. I must." Mulder put on his rumpled shirt and stuffed his tie in his pocket. "Go to sleep. When you awake—we'll do lunch."

If Scully caught the irony of his words, she gave no indication. She rolled over instead and instantly was asleep.

Mulder got into his rental car and shoved in a particular tape. Bob Seeger's *Night Moves..* blasted his eardrums, and he considered the irony...

details....

◆

"Bob Seeger—the Silver Bullet Band?" Scully stated, incredulous.

"They'd played the Chrysler Arena at the University of Michigan just before the storm got serious. They were on their way back to Detroit Metro when they got stranded with the rest of us."

Scully smiled and wrapped her arms around her kneecaps. "You never cease to amaze me."

"Neither did he. He played for hours—rehearsed with his band. The more victims of the storm that entered the restaurant, the more he jammed." Mulder sighed. "It was great."

"No... paranormal experience?"

Mulder shook his head. "Only forty odd inches of snow."

"A familiar form of alien entrapment—"

Fox Mulder threw a pillow at her.

Her laughter was what he has experienced the night before, and he appreciated it.

Mulder stood up and straightened his suit. "Come," he ordered. "I have a... school... no a gaggle of catfish to feed—particularly one—"

"Catfish...?"

"A very insisitant... fish."

"Oh."

"What are we feeding them?", Scully grabbed her purse.

"Got any *Fritos*—no—*Cheerios*?"

Dr. Dana Scully, M.D., Special Agent, F.B.I., sighed...

■ the end ■

Scully opened the door to her room with a deep breath and no hesitation.

Mulder walked in, and reviewed the scene of the 'crime.'

Their intimacy was possibly a fatal mistake. He could keep the knowledge from her... but not from himself... considering the game... it could get them both killed...

Not liking his options he moved to the desk nook and took a seat around the round conference table with the overhanging lamp. "Talk to me, Scully. What do you want?"

She squared her shoulders. "Truth," and deliberately didn't look at her bed. "I don't remember last night—you do. Talk to me."

Mulder glanced at the tousled bed. "I was your lover," he stated simply.

Scully's eyes widened. "N—oh my god—"

He crossed his fingers with the mentally practiced images of the past few hours. "You couldn't help it. You see..." and gave her all the

"A VOICE IN THE DARKNESS" by Margaret A. Basta

Mulder chuckled; softly at first, then louder with greater animation. He was alone in his basement office, so he could openly appreciate a tomfoolery of life that had come across his desk with no one but the dust beasties lurking on dingy ledges, and the silverfish scuttling about in the dark corners of his bureaucratic dungeon to observe his amusement.

"Those guys..." He shook his head in mock disbelief. "They did it again." He chalked another point on his imaginary tote board up to the Lone Gunmen, that wild group of wacky guys that sometimes helped, sometimes hindered Mulder's goals in life in proving that the truth was out there, and would one day be revealed.

He picked up the source of his amusement, folded the four page report, and neatly placed it inside his jacket pocket. He'd get around to showing this report to his partner, the redoubtable, skeptical Scully after he had confirmed some of the more ludicrous statements contained upon it with the Lone Gunmen.

He just knew that they had to be the perpetrators of this report. Only Frohike, Byers, Langly and others of their brethren could have created something this incredible, this outre, this outrageous.

He shook his head again in admiration at the brilliance of their hoax. For he knew that it had to be a hoax. Their hoax. What else - who else - could explain what was contained in this report?

He had long believed that someday Earth would be formally contacted by a superior intelligence from outer space. But, not today.

Stretching a bit he stood, picking up his grey suit jacket and slipping his arms into it, absentmindedly checking to make sure that the papers in the pocket stayed put. He reached over and flipped off his computer monitor, actually remembered to pick up and rinse out his coffee cup without Scully nagging him to do so, and then strolled out of his habitat flicking off the overhead light switch.

About twenty-five minutes after six he pulled up in front of Scully's place, driving a government issue silver grey Ford Taurus. Scully was waiting for him by the front door, appropriately dressed for the April D.C. weather.

"You're late," she announced as she opened up the passenger side door. "You told me to be ready at six." She shut the car door with an audible, satisfactory thunk.

"Did I?" He shrugged his shoulders, dodging her accusatory stare. "I must have meant to tell you six thirty."

Scully buckled her seat belt over her neat beige pant suit and grey London Fog trench coat, before she deigned to respond.

"What meeting are you going to? What was so urgent? And why did you want me to come along?"

He chose his words carefully. "A group of us, that is... It's a special meeting of some significance..."

She grimly smiled. "You are finally going to attend a twelve step meeting? That would explain a lot about some of your pet theories..."

He glanced at her and grinned. "Sorry to let you down Scully, but I don't yet feel the need to confess my vices or to publicly make amends with anyone we know just yet."

He could see that she was curious over their destination. He knew that she was wondering about his strange-for-even-him invitation issued earlier this afternoon.

"So...?" She suddenly sounded decidedly suspicious as if she were getting ready to indict him for some unnamed transgression.

He took the offensive path. "This isn't a date, Scully."

She sighed, irritated, barely refraining from reading him a riot act. "I never thought that you thought that it was. You did state something about this being agency business."

He drove a while, getting onto the George Washington Memorial Parkway paralleling the

Potomac, heading in a rather roundabout way toward the Washington suburb of McClean, before he provided a tidbit of information.

"It is Agency business, Scully. A file crossed my desk this morning while you were at that staff meeting with Skinner. I read it and then thought that it was something that we might be able to clear up tonight."

"What?"

"Wouldn't it be nice to actually have a case file that could be easily resolved in just one night?"

"Yes, that would be nice. But I don't realistically expect that to happen in my lifetime as long as I am still partnered with you."

"Ah, Agent Scully, you should have more faith..." he teased.

She ignored him, looking out her window at the gorgeous panoramic display of Spring that driving the Parkway provided. Every now and then she glanced at him, noting his air of suppressed amusement, and his almost devilish, daring attitude.

She sighed deeply, wondering if she should just surrender and play his little game. "Where are we going?"

"To a house in McClean."

She sighed again. "Are you going to tell me anything more or do I have to play 'Twenty Questions' with you?"

"I'd like to think that I could provide you with more than twenty answers someday."

"Mulder!" she warned.

He continued to drive in silence for a while before he turned into a driveway passing by a massive brick gateway with an electronically controlled Victorian wrought iron gate. Still, he didn't say anything even as they pulled up before an elegant Georgian style red brick mansion with a contemporary portico extending the entire length of one side of the house. The formal pathways leading to the house and the gardens beyond almost glowed with the golden light from the vanishing evening sun, tinting a pathway of ivory tulips an aurene color that only a master Impressionist paintbrush could ever accurately capture.

Though Scully would not admit it out loud, she was impressed by the distinction as well as the understated privileged atmosphere of this well-maintained estate.

"Who lives here?" She shook her head even as a waiting servant in a black uniform opened up her car door for her.

The swarthy, towering manservant who could moonlight as a bouncer, holding the car door did not answer her questions. Instead, he looked over at her partner and pleasantly grunted, "You are looking well, Mr. Mulder. They are expecting you in the usual place." He smiled, his two gold front teeth glinted in the sunset. "Shall I escort you, or do you know the way by now?"

Thoroughly suspicious, and beginning to be annoyed by Mulder's continuing caginess, Scully strode up to her partner, her low heels clacking noisily against the hand-set brick driveway. She looked him straight in the eye. "Did you think I wouldn't notice?" Whenever Mulder didn't want to tell her anything, it usually meant that their case had something to do with tabloid alien sightings or Frohike.

"Notice what?"

"The microwave dishes hidden beyond those crepe myrtle trees."

"Meaning, Scully?"

"If this is where Frohike lives, you will only survive long enough to beg my forgiveness, Mulder."

"What's the matter with you, Scully? Isn't Frohike every girl's dreamboat as well as being the nicest paranoid you know?"

"And this place?" She nodded in the direction of the house as the servant advanced to open the door for them.

"Well..." Mulder had the good grace to look embarrassed. "One of Frohike's acquaintances could be considered wealthy."

"What did he do Mulder, rob a bank? Is that how the Lone Gunmen support their

obsessions?" She looked back over the front gate. "If I am not mistaken the estate across the road belongs to a relative of Senator Kennedy."

"Actually, the friend of the Lone Gunmen that owns this place is an expert on computer fraud. Or something like that."

"Solving fraud or committing it?"

Mulder smiled his best 'please forgive me' smile. "Shall we?" He gestured beyond the open door into the foyer of the house.

Scully conceded, and entered looking about, not bothering to disguise her curiosity. What she saw was a marble foyer filled with everything that one would expect in a house purchased from one of the old Virginian landed gentry. She observed parquetry floors, a 19th century Baccarat crystal chandelier, and a double Robert Adams' style staircase flanked by Marc Solon English MINTONS' pate-sur-pate porcelain urns filled with expensive, fresh hot-house tropical flowers.

The only thing that was out of place in this Architectural Digest setting was a rumpled Frohike standing beside a burled walnut side door, accompanied by Langly and Byers.

Byers stepped forward, nervously stroking his beard.

"Mulder. Scully. What's so urgent?"

Langly added, "Why'd you send us the message to meet here, Mulder?"

Another man stepped around this trio, and bowed before Scully.

"Welcome to my home, Dr. Scully." He nodded at Mulder. "Good to see you again, Agent Mulder."

Mulder stepped forward. "Scully, may I introduce to you Dr. Horatio Harriman Nelson." Before she could even ask the obvious, he added, "And yes, he is the late Admiral Harriman Nelson's nephew."

She extended her hand forward in greeting, studying the tall, stocky gentleman, a man with sandy hair and a greying pointed beard, who was probably in his early fifties. "You published a most interesting work about expanding the parameters of Drake's Equation a few years ago." She sent an expectant glare in the direction of Mulder. "Is that why we are here? ET called collect?"

"In a manner of speaking." Dr. Nelson's smile was surprisingly charming as he took the lady's arm and formally escorted Scully into the library. "After my research for the SETI project was published, I made the fortuitous acquaintance of these fine gentlemen and their associates."

"All of them?"

Nelson laughed. "Well, as many of our group that were not terrified of meeting someone new."

Frohike quickly spoke up, quite defensive. "There's nothing wrong with a good dose of healthy paranoia now and then, Miss Scully." He glanced around. "Where would we all be if we didn't truly know that someone was really out to get us?"

"Dead," Langly pragmatically added, nervously looking out the windows in the library. He was the sort of man who always expected danger to be lurking in any corner, light or dark.

Knowing that even paranoid could have real enemies, Scully mildly agreed, then looked at her partner.

"You said something about Agency business, Agent Mulder?"

Mulder didn't have to possess psychic powers to know that Scully was upset with him over his possible deception. So he grinned, knowing that it would irritate her even more. And then he reached inside of his suit coat and brought forth the report he had removed from his desk.

"This really is about business, Scully. But, for a change, it does not concern life-threatening maniacs, end-of-the world prophets, alienabducted teenagers or there-are-monsters-under-our-beds conspirators." He unfolded the pages and handed them to Dr. Nelson. "Can you explain this, Dr. Nelson, since you are such an expert on Seti research?"

Dr. Nelson vaguely waved toward the chairs and sofas by a fireplace where bottles of beer and bowls of Cheetos awaited them on an authentic Baltimore Chippendale library table.

"Please, make yourselves comfortable while I read this report," Nelson directed, as he searched several pockets of his green corduroy jacket before he found his reading glasses. But then he looked over at Frohike who was warily checking his bottle's cap for tampering. "I've already tested the Strohs, my friend. It's not poisoned."

"Are you sure?" Frohike argued. "I can think of several ways to..."

"Grow up," Langly growled. "Besides it's easier to induce the poison into an open glass rather than a capped beer bottle. Anyway, why would Nelson want to poison you? What makes you think that you're so special compared to the rest of us?"

"My AI beat his computer at chess last week," Frohike mumbled.

"And I've programmed a twelve-year-old Atari that can beat your AI. So what?" Byers snorted. "If I really wanted to poison you..."

But this little squabble was interrupted by the sound of Dr. Nelson laughing out loud.

"Mulder, is this really why you're here?" He stepped over to Mulder, holding the report, flapping the pages about as if he was swatting at invisible mosquitoes.

Mulder looked over at Nelson, hastily wiping the residue of Cheetos off of his fingers on a paper napkin before he took the papers. "Yes, Nelson. Do you know about it?"

"Know what?" Frohike asked, through a mouth full of orange crunchies.

"The Zagros Transmissions," Nelson explained as he noticed that Agent Scully wasn't snacking or drinking. He looked about for a glass for Miss Scully.

"Zagros?" Mulder looked about when he realized that all of the Lone Gunmen were starting to snicker.

"Some MIT grad..." Byers started to explain when he was interrupted.

"Byers only thinks that it's an MIT grad..." Frohike shouted. "He's prejudiced. There's no proof that the creator of the Zagros Transmissions didn't come from..."

"Arcturus..." Langly interjected.

At this, Nelson choked, even as he handed Scully a clean Steuben pilsner glass filled with tap beer taken from a hide-away side bar. He turned on Langly, shaking his head.

"You can't possibly think that this is for real? I realize that you have always had a significant problem in properly comprehending and interpreting scientific data, Langly. But even you must realize..."

"Realize what, Nelson?" Langly bickered back.

It was at this moment when Scully had decided that she had had enough. She shoved back a lock of red hair that was threatening to fall in her eyes, put down her untouched glass of beer on a coaster, stood, then grabbed the pages out of Mulder's hands. She read the report as the men argued about her, the volume of their disagreement growing louder with every retort. And then she walked over to Mulder and gave him the look; that special, specific look that Mulder knew all too well. And really didn't like getting.

He was suitably chastised.

Mulder wisely refrained from making any obvious remark to Scully in front of the Lone Gunmen. Instead, he opted for, "Cheetos, Scully?"

She whirled about and faced a somewhat puzzled Dr. Nelson. "According to this report, outer space transmissions have been detected on a cycle of one-hundred-and-eighty-six sidereal circadian days for the past fifty-four months."

"An observatory in the Zagros Mountains was the first to record the transmission four-and-one-half years ago," Nelson explained. "But, considering that they were Turkish astronomers reporting to their English colleagues, it wasn't taken seriously until the next transmission six months later, that anyone in our little community began to pay attention to the recordings. By then, enough ears were listening."

Scully scanned the texts of the received transmissions. And then she noted the dates.

"And tonight, if things go as predicted, there will be another transmission."

"Provided the grad student hasn't had his funding nipped - or been caught yet," Frohike

darkly remarked, this time opening up his second beer without checking for evidence of tampering.

Startled, Scully studied Frohike for a moment. If there was anyone in this group who should have been believing that these transmissions were the genuine thing, it should have been Frohike. He should have been protesting their legitimacy. She went over to him. "You know that these transmissions are a hoax?"

Frohike responded to being the center of Scully's attention. He preened a little as he explained, "Well, when I was a grad student... that is, before I was expelled by that fussy, vindictive..." He stopped speaking for a moment when he saw Mulder silently shaking his head in warning. Regrouping his thoughts, rethinking his tactics, he then stated, "That is, something like these outer space transmissions **is** something that I would have done, could have done..."

Mulder still was shaking his head.

"But, I didn't do it. Honest!"

For once, Scully believed him. "Then you know how someone could fake sending transmissions so that they appear to be coming from deep space..." She checked her pages again. "From this Silarian Sector?"

Frohike puffed a little bit more. "Well, I don't know exactly how this particular hoax was done. But I do know how it could be done..."

Nelson came over, nervously tapping his open gold hunter's pair case pocket watch. "You can explain all of this later, Mr. Frohike. Right now, let's go to my lab to see if our clever trickster is keeping to his schedule of the last five years."

Smiling in response to Agent Scully's curious gaze, he extended his arm, and motioned toward a burled wood panelled wall with built-in bookcases filled with everything from extremely rare incunabula to Clive Cussler paperbacks.

"Shall we?"

Taking Dr. Nelson's arm, Scully nodded.

Walking over to a bookcase, pulling down several Moroccan red leather-bound books in a specific pattern, Dr. Nelson guided Agent Scully and the others through a secret door hidden behind the panelled wall and into his laboratory. Nelson proudly showed off his lab; a room that could be best described as the ultimate paranoid's war room, computer lab and little boy's fantasy play room.

Scully wisely did not pay attention to any of the equipment or consoles that might reveal classified information or technology that a good FBI agent might have to do something about. Instead she concentrated on the panels and computer screens that Dr. Nelson was specifically pointing out.

Byers interrupted their private, personal tour with, "My knee. It hurts." He looked around, threatening to open up side doors that perhaps Dr. Nelson wouldn't want opened. "Well, where are we supposed to sit, Nelson? I can't stand for hours... My knee, it will give out on me..."

Eventually, enough folding chairs were found so that they all could be seated.

And so they waited, attentively listening to the noise of universal crackling and static, the sound of music from uncharted stars. At seven thirty-six Byers announced, "Our tale teller is late."

"He's been late before," Langly stated. "Four times, according to my records."

Scully checked the report again. "The perpetrator has sent a slightly different message each time."

Mulder was about to speak when something came through the speakers.

Fascinated, Sully listened in silence, as a voice came through the darkness. In spite of the astral static noises, a strong voice could be heard. And even though she knew that it was utterly impossible for a deep space message to be sent to Earth, spoken in a language from Earth, there was an intensity to the speaker's words that seemingly belied the possibility of a hoax. As Dana heard the message spoken in English, a part of her soul began to question what was really the truth.

"This is Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Federation. I am stranded on the planet Kataan, in the city of Ressik, in the Silarian Sector. This will be the last message that I will ever send, for I am now willing to accept my life here in Ressik as Kamin. If anyone should ever hear this message, please convey to my friends in Starfleet and on board the U.S.S. Enterprise this news. And if too much time has passed, tell my friends that at last I have found peace in my new life. Stardate 4599.1... Jean-Luc Picard out."

"Masterful," Mulder remarked, when it was over. "I declare that guy to be king of the starry nights, when it comes to hoaxes."

Scully looked over at her partner, somewhat surprised by his words. Mulder seemed positive that this was a hoax, even though she was now unsure. The facts indicated one thing, but that voice said another...

On Monday morning, it was Mulder who gave Scully her coffee, for the lady was sitting at her desk, seemingly preoccupied.

"What is it, Scully?" He looked down at the files on her desk concerning their latest, newest cases, but it was obvious that she wasn't reading them. "What's bothering you?"

"Oh, nothing much, Mulder. Just that little fiasco of yours, Friday night. You get to type the closing report. Not me."

"I thought that Dr. Nelson asked you out on a date. How can you label such an event a 'fiasco'?"

She raised her head up and glared at him. "I have a friend who is an astrophysicist."

"It's nice to know that you have friends, Scully."

She continued to glare at him.

"So?"

"I talked with her yesterday."

"And?"

"The Silarian Sector - it isn't a province or the name of a state or even the name of a new heavy metal band."

"Can I make any other choices?" Though Scully didn't say a word, he correctly guessed the answer to this question. He tried to return to the facts, and just the facts.

"So, what is the Silarian Sector, Scully?"

"It's the name of an irregular galaxy."

"Something irregular about our cases, who would have thought it?"

"The Silarian Sector wasn't identified and given a name until eight months ago by an astronomer in Hawaii."

Mulder considered her words. "But our outer space messages were mentioning that name for the past five years..."

"Right."

"Maybe the astronomer who named the Silarian Sector did so after hearing about the Zagros Transmissions..."

"According to Professor Mot of the Keck Observatory on Mauna Loa, he never heard of the Zagros Transmissions until I called him."

"And you believed him?"

"Why would Professor Mot lie?"

Mulder shook his head, denying what he was hearing. There was no way that the Zagros Transmissions could be real. It must be something else.

"Scully, you know that there has to be some rational explanation..."

She stared at him, absolutely amazed by his words, stunned that he could even say them, that he even knew how to say them. She covered her astounded expression by taking a hasty sip of bad coffee. She doubted if she'd ever hear Mulder make such a statement ever again in her life.

And she would have been right.

CONFESIONS

An Epilogue to "Pusher"

by

Nancy Nivling

Mulder pulled up in front of Scully's apartment building and switched off the lights and ignition. He glanced over to where she sat in the passenger's seat, still as a statue, her hands clasped in her lap, gazing out the window.

She hadn't said a word since they had left the hospital.

"You okay?" he asked, tentatively touching her arm.

She finally looked at him, nodding. "Would you like to come in for a few minutes? I'll make coffee." His hesitation must have shown in his face, for she added, "I could really use the company right now."

So could he, Mulder thought. He was feeling way too drained to go back to the office and start working on his report, but at the same time found the idea of returning to his empty apartment distinctly unappealing.

"You talked me into it," he said with a smile.

Not five minutes later, Mulder found himself sitting on Scully's couch, scratching Clyde the Pomeranian behind his pointy ears. Clyde's tail thumped the floor in doggy ecstasy.

Then came the unmistakable sound of kibble being poured

into a plastic bowl, and Clyde scampered into the kitchen.

"Fair weather friend," he muttered, pulling off his suit jacket and slouching back on the cushions. Scully's couch was so soft and comfortable, he had to work at staying awake.

Her whole apartment was comfortable, he thought, glancing blearily around the living room. Warm and natural. Just like Scully, once you got to know her. All the guys at the Bureau who called her the "Ice Queen" didn't know how wrong they were.

Scully padded in a couple minutes later, carrying a pair of steaming mugs. She had changed from her work clothes into a heather gray sweatsuit and pink slippers. Her hair was pulled back in a pony tail, her face freshly scrubbed and glowing.

He had never seen her look more beautiful.

Handing him a mug, she sat down beside him. "Sorry to keep you waiting, but I had to get out of those clothes."

"No problem."

They sat and sipped at their coffee for a few long, silent minutes. Finally, Scully set her mug down on the table.

"I almost lost you today, Mulder."

He groaned inwardly, feeling a jab of annoyance. Couldn't she see he wasn't up for this conversation? "Do we really have to get into this right now?"

"I'm sorry, but I need to talk about it. I won't sleep a wink tonight if I don't. I probably won't anyway." She paused, studying her clasped hands. "It was a risk you didn't have to take."

"Somebody had to."

"We had a trained SWAT team standing by. There was no need for you to go in alone."

"You can say that, even after I turned the gun on you?"

"That was Modell, not you, Mulder. You know I could never hold you responsible," she said softly. "But if there'd been a bullet in the chamber of that gun when you put it to your head, you'd be the one lying on a slab in the morgue right now."

"Guess you could say I missed out on a golden opportunity for early retirement."

"That's right -- make some smartass remark, laugh it off," she snapped. "Don't you even care that you scared the living hell out of me? I'll be having nightmares for a week, thanks to you!"

And with that, she snatched up her mug and marched into the kitchen.

Realization curled in Mulder's belly, sour and leaden. She was right. He'd been so preoccupied with his own agenda over the past few months, he hadn't given the least consideration to Scully's feelings -- about work or anything else.

He'd been a jerk, and she'd had every right to call him on it.

He found her standing by the sink, her back turned to him.

"I'm sorry, Scully," he said, sliding a gentle hand onto her shoulder. "I didn't mean to upset you."

But when she turned to face him, he saw the tears brimming in her eyes.

"You don't get it, do you?" she whispered. "You spend so

much time looking up in the sky, you're blind to what's right in front of you."

She looked at him the same way she had when he'd handed her his gun in the hospital -- with quiet, aching anguish.

And in that moment, he knew exactly what she was trying to tell him.

"Jesus," he breathed. "How long have you felt this way?"

"Since I came out of the coma. When I saw you there at my bedside with Mom and Melissa, I knew for sure."

Almost a year and a half, and he hadn't had a clue. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Would it have mattered?"

"Of course it would. This changes everything."

"That's just it. I don't want anything to change."

Mulder smoothed back a stray lock of her hair, tilting her chin up so that her eyes met his. "You sure about that?"

She blushed. "What I meant was...I don't want us to have to stop working together. I'd rather quit the Bureau than let that happen."

"They didn't make you stop working with Jack Willis."

"That was different. Jack was my mentor, not my partner."

"We wouldn't be the first pair of partners to get involved with each other."

She studied him for a long moment, moistening her lips. "I didn't think you were interested."

"Are you serious? I've been flirting with you from the day we met."

"I thought you were only doing it to rattle me."

"Looks like it worked," he said softly. A stray tear slid down her right cheek, and he wiped it away with the pad of his thumb.

Her skin felt like heated satin.

His arms wrapped around her before good sense could stop him. Sliding one hand upward, he threaded his fingers deep in her hair, bringing his mouth down gently on hers.

To his amazement, she melted against him, clinging to him. Her pebbled nipples rubbed against him through their clothing and he slipped a hand beneath her sweatshirt, stroking her with his fingertips, feeling the rapid flutter of her heart.

She moaned, parting her lips for him. His first real taste of her -- tangy, smoky-sweet -- sent an electric shock flooding through him, searing his senses.

It became too intense to bear. He drew back, breaking the kiss but not the embrace. Trembling and breathless, she rested her head on his shoulder.

"Ask me to stay," he whispered.

"Stay. Please."

He wasn't quite sure how they got to the bedroom, but the next thing he knew he was lying next to her on the bed, all of her clothing and most of his discarded.

Mulder drew her close, kissing and caressing her, running his hands over her flawless ivory skin, bending down to take a rosy-brown nipple into his mouth. He breathed deeply, drinking in the fresh, clean scent of her, like roses after rain.

He couldn't believe how beautiful she was, how incredibly good it felt to hold her. He'd been fantasizing about her for almost as long as they'd known each other, but his imagination had never conjured up anything half as devastating as this.

"You're not playing fair," she murmured, one hand moving down to rub the hard bulge in his pants.

He rolled away, her touch jolting him, almost making him come. "Take it easy, or this'll be over before it's started."

"Maybe I don't want to take it easy."

Her green eyes gazed up at him, lambent with desire. He'd wanted to go slow, to drive her crazy with wanting him, but now he doubted either of them would last much longer. He staggered to his feet and stripped off his pants -- then suddenly thought of something that made him curse under his breath.

She flashed him a questioning look.

"I...uh, don't have any protection," he said.

"Check the bedside table."

He found what looked like a brand-new package of condoms in the top drawer and ripped it open, extracting a shiny foil packet. But try as he might, he couldn't get it on.

"Let me," she said, sliding over to the edge of the bed, a bemused smile playing at the corners of her mouth. Reaching for a fresh packet, she rolled it on, her touch so deft he scarcely felt it.

But he couldn't help feeling it when her hand closed around his shaft, stroking him.

He pushed her back down on the bed, landing on top of her.

Kissing her hungrily, he rubbed his erection on her belly, then lower, using the tip to tease her clitoris.

She whimpered, clutching at him.

"Say you want me," he whispered.

"I...want you."

"Say my name."

"Mul--"

"No. My name."

"Fox," she breathed. "I want you, Fox."

"How do you want me?"

"Now. Please."

Sliding both hands under her bottom, he eased himself into her, gasping. She felt so warm and wet and tight he almost lost control.

He began slowly rocking her, burying himself deeper in her with each stroke, while she drew him down to her so that their entire bodies touched, skin to skin. He could feel their hearts racing, pounding in perfect time with each other.

One pulse. One life.

She cried out, her inner muscles contracting, rippling up and down the length of him.

This time he couldn't hold back. Slashing his mouth down hard on hers, he plunged to her core, hurtling them both over the blinding white edge.

* * *

Scully woke to find sunlight pouring through her curtains.

dapping her comforter with pretty dancing patterns. She looked at the clock on her bedside table and groaned. Almost ten a.m.

Then she remembered it was Saturday. A secret smile curving her lips, she rolled over--

And found the other side of her bed empty.

A fine blade of pain lanced her heart, and she blinked back the burning sensation of tears behind her eyes. She supposed she should have expected this. They hadn't made each other any promises, and she'd always suspected that Mulder wasn't the kind to let grass grow under his feet. No doubt the cold light of day had finally brought him to his senses.

Well, it would have to do the same for her. They had planned to go into the office today to start working on their respective reports, and she wasn't about to let him see how stunned and hurt she felt.

Padding into the bathroom, she took a shower and brushed her teeth. Then, throwing on her pink terrycloth robe, she headed for the kitchen--

And stopped dead in the middle of the living room.

He was sitting on the couch reading the morning paper, mug of coffee in hand, fully dressed except for his suit jacket, tie and shoes. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbow, the neck of his shirt unbuttoned.

But it was his sleep-tousled hair and the light stubble on his face that made her knees start wobbling like warm jelly.

"I...I thought you'd left," she said, barely able to keep her voice steady.

A flicker of something -- pain, disappointment, she wasn't quite sure which -- danced across his face, but he concealed it quickly. "I got a little restless, so I came out here. I didn't want to wake you up again."

Heat flushed her cheeks as she remembered their second bout of lovemaking, sometime during the hazy early morning hours. He'd taken her with such slow, heartbreaking tenderness that she had lain in his arms afterward, weeping from the joy of it.

"Want some coffee?" he asked, rising. "I made a fresh pot."

"I can get it."

"That's okay. I need another cup myself."

She nodded numbly, sitting down on the far end of the couch from where he had been sitting, taking deep breaths in a vain attempt to calm herself. He obviously wanted to talk, but she hadn't the faintest idea what to say to him. Now she wished he'd taken the heel's way out and left while she was still asleep.

Fortunately, he let her drink down half her coffee before reaching for her hand. "You okay?"

She nodded, staring into her cup.

"Look, I want you to know I don't regret what happened. In fact, I think it was pretty incredible."

"That's one word for it," she said quietly.

"I wouldn't mind it happening again."

Dear God, she hadn't expected this. She hadn't expected him to want anything more than a one-night stand. A sudden wave of panic threatened to overwhelm her. "There've only been two other men in my life, Mulder. This isn't something I do casually."

"You think I don't know that? You're an old-fashioned girl at heart, Scully. Flings aren't your style. That's not what I'm proposing at all."

"What are you proposing?"

"How about a serious affair of the heart?"

She almost dropped her cup. "We can't. You know we can't."

"Why can't we? And don't give me that crap about the Bureau breaking us up. We're adults, we can keep our hands off each other at the office. As long as we're discreet, chances are they won't find out."

"It's not the Bureau I'm worried about. It's me," she said. "What if I can't handle it? What if your life's threatened and I freeze?"

"You won't."

"I almost did yesterday! When Modell made you turn that gun on yourself, then on me, I felt completely helpless."

"That's a normal reaction, for God's sake. Stop beating yourself up over it."

"No, you don't understand. I was feeling helpless for you, Mulder," she said softly. "For your humiliation and loss of control. Seeing you like that scared me half to death. I never want to feel that way again."

"Then you'd better buy yourself an uninhabited island and move there pronto, because that's the only way you're going to avoid it."

"Don't you dare make fun of me," she said slowly, her tone suddenly cold as ice.

Slamming his cup down on the table, he jumped to his feet. "You think you're the only one who's ever felt helpless? How the hell do you think I felt when you disappeared for three months? If some miracle hadn't brought you back, I'd have probably blown my goddamn brains out by now!"

His words smashed into her like a clenched fist. He hadn't wanted to go on living without her. Stunned into silence, she watched him move to the window and stare out into the sunlight, his back turned to her.

"While you were...gone, I got called out on a case in Los Angeles."

"I-I know. I read your report."

"This part wasn't in it." He stopped, rubbing one hand over his face. "I went back to Kristen Kilar's house after the police left. I spent the night with her."

Jealousy's sharp claws pricked at her, even though she told herself there was no rational reason for it. Mulder's life was his own; she had no right to censure him for any liaisons he'd had in the past. Still, she hadn't thought he'd been with anyone else since they'd become partners. "I see."

"I don't even know why it happened. It wasn't about sex; I didn't find her all that attractive." He let out a long, slow breath. "I couldn't sleep anymore. All I could do was work, but that only made missing you worse."

"Mulder, are you trying to say you slept with her because you were lonely for me?"

He didn't answer, other than to step back from the window.

She couldn't help thinking that the hazy golden light behind him made him look almost angelic. "I've been in love with you for a long time. Guess I was just too dense to figure it out til now."

He couldn't have said what she thought he just said. "Oh, God," she breathed. "Please don't do this to me."

"I'm not doing anything to you," he said, kneeling down on the carpet beside her. "I just want you to give us a chance."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because everyone who loves me dies." This time the searing pain behind her eyes couldn't be blinked away. "First my father, then Melissa...I'm not letting you add yourself to the list."

"You think that's something you can control?" She tried to look away, but he grabbed hold of her chin. "You think that was some sleazy little game we were playing last night? That we can just forget about it and have our lives go back to the way they were before? It doesn't work like that."

"How does it work, then? You tell me."

"We go forward, as partners or lovers or both, your choice. But don't ever pretend to me that last night didn't happen."

She could feel the tears spilling down her cheeks, taste the saltiness of them. "I can't do this, Mulder. I can't let myself get that close to you. The work we do is too dangerous."

"Look, despite what you might have thought yesterday, I'm not planning on dying anytime soon. And I'm not going to stand by and watch you die, either."

"But I don't want you to feel you have to protect me. I can

take care of my--" All of a sudden, realization dawned. "That's what yesterday was all about, wasn't it? That's why you insisted on going to find Modell alone."

"Isn't that what partners do -- protect each other? Back each other up?"

She looked at him, exhaled a ragged breath. "It could still happen. Every time we go out in the field, we take that risk."

"All the more reason for us to seize the moment."

"One day at a time?"

"If that's the way you want it."

She closed her eyes, praying silently for strength. Could she handle loving him at night, then working with him every day, seeing him put his life in danger time and again? Would she be able do it without driving herself crazy with worry?

Her mind whirled with a thousand conflicting thoughts and emotions, yet even in all the confusion she knew one thing for sure: she loved him, and she wanted to be with him.

The rest would have to sort itself out somehow.

"I...I'd like to try," she whispered.

His kiss set her soul on fire, making her dizzy. Before she was aware of what was happening, he had moved back to the couch and was pulling her over into his lap, letting her straddle him. She felt his fingers loosening the belt of her robe, slipping it from her shoulders.

"My, my. You're full of surprises lately," he said, eyeing her nude body with obvious appreciation.

A token protest rose to her lips, but the stroking of his

hands and the rough, burning kisses he was trailing down her throat transformed it into a deep moan. Within seconds she was oblivious to everything other than the nearness of him and the slow, stabbing ache welling within her.

She wrapped her arms about his neck, letting him suckle her nipples, relishing the smooth slide of his white cotton shirt on her skin. For some reason, she suddenly found the idea of making love to him like this, she naked, he fully clothed, unbelievably erotic.

"Say you love me."

She looked down into his eyes, pinned by the intensity of his gaze. If she spoke the words to him, right here, right now, she knew there would be no going back for either of them, ever.

"Say it."

"I love you, Mulder," she whispered. "I need you."

"Unbutton my shirt."

She did as he asked, peeling the material back but not off, running her hands over his chest, down his belly to his fly.

"Unzip me."

She had the zipper three-quarters of the way down when a niggling thought occurred. "Um...you didn't bring the condoms in here, did you?"

"No."

"That's what I was afraid of."

He let out a groan. "Just when I was getting the hang of it," he muttered, lifting her gently off his lap.

Something in his tone puzzled her. "What are you talking

about, other than the obvious?"

"Oh, I think you know."

Her mind raced back to the previous night, remembered the strangely caressing tone he'd used when he asked her to touch him, to say things to him. The same tone he'd just used to get her to tell him she loved him.

"Mulder...you don't honestly expect me to believe you put the whammy on me?"

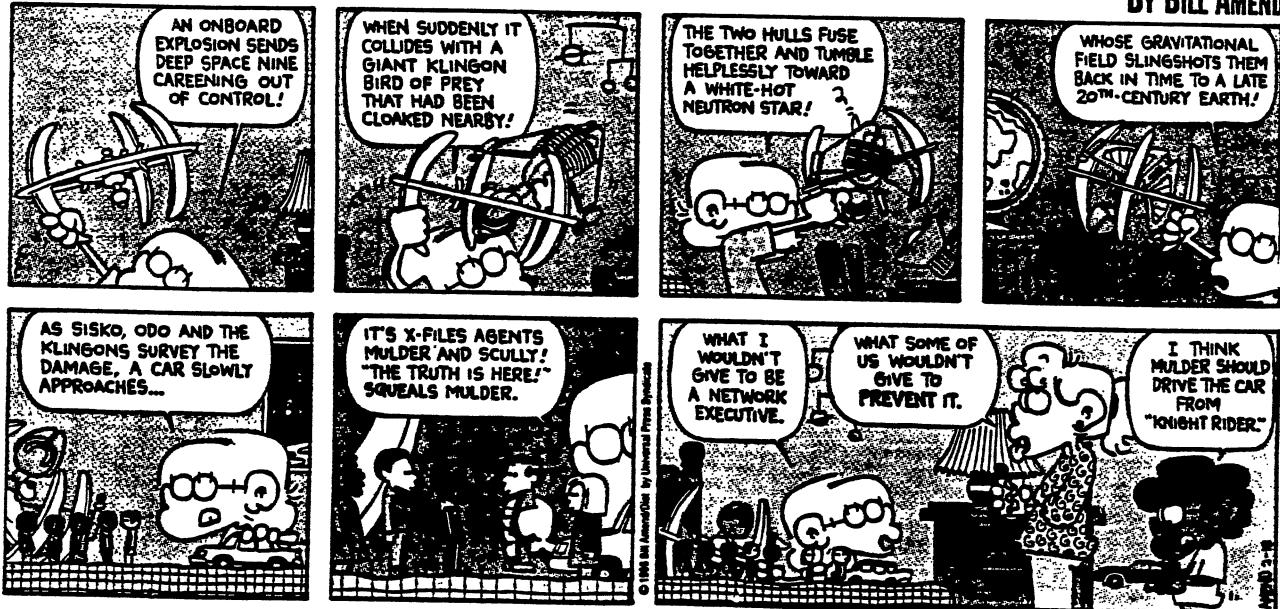
He flashed her the world's smuggest grin. "Well, whatever it was, I'd say it did the trick."

"Mulder!"

Laughing, he leaned over, giving her another heart-stopping kiss. "C'mon, G-woman. I'll race you to the bedroom."

OXTROT

BY BILL AMEND



“NIGHT, KNIGHT” by Margaret A. Basta.

Murmurs echoed about the walls, bouncing off of the gothic arches. Multiple cries of, "I don't want her, you can have her...", were repeated by all those gathered who waited for their master to make an announcement.

"I do not want her."

An elegant man, tall, goliathic looking with silvered hair, flicked an invisible piece of lint off of his superbly tailored black silk shirt sleeve. He spoke these words again, lacing his voice with undisguised disdain.

"I do not want her."

He then glanced over at the person standing next to him in the cavernous, forsaken church.

"You may have her," he pronounced, his voice barely disguising his distaste for the proceedings. He motioned to the man. "Screed?"

The emaciated man known as Screed convulsed. His dirty, raggedy clothes quivered in marked contrast to the superior nature of the outfit belonging to the first gentleman. Screed openly shuddered at this offer, rapidly shaking his head in denial.

"Wha' d'yer take me fer? A bloomin' idiot? I don' wan' 'er. No sirreeh, ole Screed ain't likely ta wan' ta 'ave 'er over me own blessed rats!" He shook his head again. "Take 'er, she's yers!" he proclaimed to one and all in the room.

A woman stepped forward. Her claret evening gown of sequinned silk flowed ever so gracefully about her body, subtly drawing attention to every feminine charm. She drew her fingers along the line of her high cheek bone. Her nail lacquer was the exact same color as her dress, blood red markers against the dead white of her skin.

Ebony shoulder-length hair rippled as she too, shook her head. "I don't want her." She whirled about, staring pointedly at the elegant gentleman. "I cannot imagine why you would even think to ask me!" she snapped, displeased with even having been summoned to this gathering. She'd had enough tragedy as of late. She didn't need to further complicate her existence.

She looked down at the dying woman. Blond hair was stained with dark blood. More blood oozed from her chest.

Red was spreading everywhere against a blouse of white patterned rayon...

Another man stepped forward. He was dirty too. But unlike the skinny man who bathed at least once a year, the smell of this new man offended everyone's olfactory senses.

"Well, I don't want her..." He hesitated a moment, then studied the beings in the room, before he turned around, and looked up pointing at the man hovering near the choir loft.

"You take her. Vachon! She's your problem. You solve it!"

Vachon, with his long dark curly hair fluttering about in the wind that came through the abandoned church's broken rosette window, didn't move. Or respond to Couchon's words.

The silver haired gentleman spoke again. "Well, someone must take her. She will be dead if one of us does not. And while that fact matters little to me, it does matter to one of our kind." And he turned his head to stare at Vachon. "You were the one who made the mistake of telling her about us, Vachon. You are the reason as to why she came here to us, in her pain and misery, instead of seeking help from her fellow man. She wants.... No, she expects, she demands, she begs - for your help, Vachon. And you will be the one to give solace. To bring her across."

Vachon cringed. "I cannot. Please, don't make me! Can you imagine what my life would be like, having to spend eternity with her as my disciple!" He spoke as if the notion caused him extreme pain. "I'd rather fly into the killing rays of Helios myself than to have to share the sweetness of the eternal night with the vapid likes of her!"

"Vachon!" The silver haired master shook his head threatening sarcastic chastisement. "You really should consider firing your acting coach." He pointed at the woman. "She is yours. Your problem. Now, resolve it!"

The order was given.

"I am not your minion, LaCroix!" Vachon yelled back. "You didn't bring me across! I won't!" He took a deep breath in order to screech, "I won't! I won't, I won't, I won't!"

The master stepped forward and peered into the shadows of the church. "Is there any one then, who will? Screech? Couchon?" He paused and slightly bowed before the lady in red. "Janette?"

For a long moment there was dead silence, as they all silently refused LaCroix's request.

LaCroix sighed, hating the moment, hating his choices. For he knew that he had none. "You will now owe me more than your soul, Nicolas..." he whispered to himself.

But someone heard him. Another man stepped forward. A sloppy looking man in an olive polyester suit with a matching vest, that was way too small for his rotund self. What was left of this man's dark brown hair was thinning. And even in his present state, (that of a man who could never go home again), there was a kindness and joviality about him that belied the usual attitude of the company that he was now forced to keep.

He reached over and touched the master's arm. "Did you whisper something about Nicolas?" The master nodded. "My Nicolas?" LaCroix acknowledged these words again. And the man looked down at the barely conscious wounded woman as a horrible possibility crossed his thoughts. "Oh, no. She isn't...she can't be the one who took my place." His eyes pleaded with LaCroix. "Please, tell me that she is..."

The master regretfully informed him. "She is."

"...not his partner." He tried to control the nausea that arose within him at the thought of this yemeless witling of a woman being partner with his Nicolas. Of all the shocking things that had happened to this man of a good heart, this possibility was the worst, the most. unthinkable. He gagged as he gathered what was left of his wits before speaking. "Then, I will do it. I owe Nicolas."

Vachon swooped down next to him, and grabbed him by his wide suit lapels, lifting him a few inches up off of the chipped marble floor. "No. Don't do it! No man deserves such an abysmal curse! We're talking about eternity here, for heaven's sake!"

The master couldn't help himself. A smile almost crossed over his lips. "I do not believe that heaven has had anything to do with our kind for a very long time, Monsieur Vachon."

Ignoring the master, the chubby man who was a true gentleman in his heart, went to the woman, and knelt beside her.

"Do you want me to bring you across?" he whispered, hoping that in her arrival at death's gate that she would be kind enough to say no.

With the last of her ebbing strength, she opened up her eyes, which were becoming more blank with each passing second. She stared up at the man. "Please..."

He eyed the place toward the back of the church where Vachon spent his days. It was surrounded by heavy, dusty draperies. He picked the blond up and carried her inside of the alcove to place her upon an unmade bed. He vaguely was aware that LaCroix followed.

He looked about for something sharp, but when he could not see anything that was immediately useful for his purpose, he settled upon removing a safety pin that had held the last of his remaining buttons pinned to his vest. As the vest popped apart, he opened the pin and slashed the point deeply across his left wrist. For a moment it stung like hell. And then the blood started to drip down his arm.

He then bent over the woman, breathing into her ear as he muttered, "I hope I get the words right." He took another breath, waited one more second to see if the proverbial calvary would arrive and when it didn't, he then started to chant, "My blood to your blood.... Your blood to mine..." His fangs gleamed in the candlelight from the tall bronze candelabra that surrounded the bed as he said these phrases. Then he sat up and thought to remark, "I wonder who the stupid idiot was who first thought those words up..."

"Don't drink too much," a voice cautioned in his head.

He leaned back down, and somewhat inexpertly bit her neck (for he was quite new to this), and drank her blood, draining as much as he could. He then shoved his bloody wrist up against her lips.

When he felt her slowly lick at first and then rapidly suck the blood from his flesh, he knew that the dreadful deed had been done.

When she opened up her eyes, he stared down into her vacant, washed-out blue stare. And then, he knew. She had been brought across.

*

"Scully."

She looked up from her desk and studied her partner, standing by the side of her desk holding two coffee mugs.

"Mulder," she stated back at him as she took one of the mugs, noting the rising steam and then automatically checking her wristwatch. "Is something wrong? You're actually here on time today."

He ignored her jibe, countering with, "Isn't it a beautiful day?"

Scully blinked for a moment, considering his words. "Last time I looked outside this morning, it was snowing. And snowing."

"Couldn't get an inside parking space again, eh, Scully?"

On her blank look, he explained, "Isn't it a beautiful day to be out in the snow? We could make snow angels together on our lunch hour. Discuss blizzard survival tactics... Huddling together for life-saving warmth..."

"Something that I look forward to doing with you someday, Mulder. But not just now. I have to finish this field report, and you have to re-fill out your reimbursement vouchers. Accounting sent them back. They sent you a memo; something about your vouchers not being a suitable place for your amateurish attempts at scribbling horror fiction."

"What?" He grabbed the statements from her. "Those bureaucratic buzzards think to critique my favorite literary genre? And writing style?" He read the cover memo. "Scully! They are not going to reimburse me for my custom-made silver bullets! I even remembered to include the receipts this time - before they even asked!"

"Imagine that." She drank most of her coffee before she added, "Mulder, if any other agent had sent in your voucher, they'd be up before a review board or, at the very least, be ordered to undergo a psychiatric evaluation. You're just lucky that the only thing they did to them was to send them back."

"But I need those silver bullets, Scully."

"Of course you do, Mulder. Heaven knows when we might meet up with a vampire. With the way our case files are going, I imagine that we will encounter one someday in the future."

"Actually, Scully..."

She knew that tone of voice. Whenever he started to sound like a cute little boy, there was something that he really didn't want to tell her. Or had neglected to mention to her.

"What, Mulder? Why do you need custom made silver bullets?"

"When you were missing, I really did encounter some vampires," he confessed, sounding a little sheepish.

"Really?" She didn't even try to disguise her skepticism.

"Yeah, really. I didn't believe that they were vampires at first..."

"You must have been in your right mind that day..."

He took umbrage at her words. "Actually, if you recall, I was in mourning over losing you. I had my mind on other things..."

Slightly chastised, she asked in her best, professional manner, "So, what evidence caused you to decide that you had actually encountered honest to goodness vampires?"

"I almost succumbed to their blood fever..."

She waited for him to explain. And when he didn't, she opened up the top file on her desk,

"...and then one of them turned into a pink ooze as he was exposed to sunlight."

She put down her file and studied him for a moment, but could detect no sign of exaggerated story telling or traces of a possible practical joke.

"This really happened?"

"Yes, it really did. But, I haven't gotten back that official report yet on the causes of death."

"Well, we've encountered spontaneous self-combustion before..."

"Trust me, Scully. This guy knew that he was going to bite the dust before he was exposed to the sunlight."

"So of course, only you would consider that the only possible explanation could be that the victim was a vampire."

"There were three others who burned to death in the fire - a house fire, that is. Scully, I would have died along with them if I hadn't been wearing your little gold crucifix at the time..."

She stared at him for a moment, trying to fathom what was behind his words that were usually nothing more than glib statements. And though his gaze held a hint of the devil's own mischief, she found that she could not doubt the sincerity that she heard. But her personal feelings were something that she could not reveal so she hid them behind the shield of her professional nature.

"You expect me to back up your request for repayment of your hand-made silver bullets." She made it a statement, and not a question.

"Can I help it that I was once a Boy Scout, Scully?"

"And what is that in reference to?"

"Be prepared, Scully. If I've already met one vampire, what are the odds that one day we are going to encounter other vampires again?"

"Not in my lifetime," Scully mumbled, as she returned to her report.

"But maybe in theirs..." Mulder cautioned.

She ignored him. It was the only way that she could ever get some work done, sometimes.

Two hours later they both were summoned to Assistant Director Skinner's office. He motioned for them to be seated. And then he did something quite uncharacteristic. He offered them coffee.

After everything was settled, Skinner sat back down behind his desk, and leaned back in his chair.

"Agents..."

"Yes, Sir?" Scully politely responded.

Skinner looked over at Scully for a moment, noting her neat beige pant suit, and her usual guarded expression. Then he studied Mulder, observing the ink stained fingers, and the slightly rumpled air about him as if he'd been waging battle against a tedious, trying opponent.

"I see that you are finally taking seriously the precarious status of your reimbursement vouchers, Mulder," Skinner casually observed. "I trust that you have discovered that the accounting office agents do not appreciate flights of fancy."

"Sir, about my reports..."

Skinner shook his head, raising his hand to silence Mulder. "I have overridden their protests and have authorized your reimbursement for the bullets, Mulder."

Mulder couldn't help himself. He sent a triumphant glance over to Scully.

She hid her surprise at Skinner's statement admirably well. "Sir, you do know that the request was for silver bullets, don't you, Sir?"

"Yes, Agent Scully, I do know that."

Mulder interrupted Scully before she could say anything to spoil Skinner's unexpected support over his on-going battle with Agency disbelievers.

"Thank you, Sir," Mulder hastily stated. But Mulder could never politely dissemble around Skinner. "Why, Sir?"

Skinner drank some of his coffee before he chose to answer Mulder's question. "In spite of your somewhat unorthodox approach to most cases, Agent Mulder, I have come to appreciate your occasional insight into the resolution of certain cases that would otherwise never have been

resolved without your perspicacity."

"Huh?" Mulder was confused. He wasn't used to Skinner actually commanding him about the way he handled his cases.

Scully spoke out. "Sir, is there something that you wished to discuss with Agent Mulder and myself?"

In response to her question, Skinner opened up a desk drawer and drew out a file. He plopped it down on the portion of his desk that was close to where Agent Scully was seated.

"Agents, be advised that your cooperation in this matter will be entirely at your own discretion. If you agree to do this, I'll list you as being assigned to special duty, and will be as general about the nature of the assignment in your records as I can possibly be."

Mulder was intrigued. Skinner was such a hard ass that it had to be some matter of great importance to get the Assistant Director over a barrel, so to speak.

"I don't even know what the assignment is, but it already sounds like our kind of case," Mulder half-whispered to Scully.

"You should refrain from commenting, Agent Mulder, until you find out what this case entails," Skinner grimly remarked.

"Sir?" Scully interjected, hoping to avoid any further debate between the two men.

"I have a friend..."

"A 'friend', Sir?" Mulder was curious.

Skinner raised his eyebrows, and subjected Mulder to a quelling stare before he continued. "Rather, a certain senator has a 'friend'..."

"Female?" Mulder asked before Skinner finished speaking.

Scully considered kicking Mulder in the ankle in order to get him to shut up. Though she knew that she couldn't do it in front of Skinner, the thought of inflicting bodily harm on Mulder was sometimes very, very tempting.

"I don't particularly feel like drawing you a diagram, Agent Mulder, but if you do insist..."

"No, sir. That won't be necessary," Scully hastily stated.

"Good." Skinner handed a case page to Scully. "The woman..."

"I knew that there was a woman involved," Mulder muttered under his breath.

Skinner continued, "The woman is Tracy Vetter, a homicide detective with the Toronto Police."

"And?" Scully helpfully asked.

"She is missing. Under suspicious and unusual circumstances."

Mulder took the print out from Scully. "So why are you talking to us?"

Skully added, "Shouldn't her disappearance be a matter for the Toronto Authorities?"

"Or the Royal Canadian Mounties?" Mulder was only trying to be helpful.

Skinner narrowed his steely-eyed gaze, focusing it only on Mulder. "The detective's father is Commissioner Vetter."

"Who is?" Scully quickly asked, just in case Mulder was in the mood to make more pithy comments.

"Commissioner Vetter is an important man in Canadian and American Relations. He is highly connected with the United Nations Anti-Crime Task Force as well. And..."

"And..." Mulder echoed.

"And... Commissioner Vetter just so happens to be the brother-in-law to a certain senator..."

"Who just so happens to be on the committee that controls the agency's slush fund budget?" Mulder suggested.

On Skinner's angry look which told him just how accurate his guess was, Mulder smiled just a little bit before he added, "I'm psychic."

"No, Agent Mulder, if you were psychic, you'd have your own reality based television remake of THE F.B.I. Or you would be guest-starring on THE NEW INVADERS. Truth is, you simply have unusual instincts," Skinner pronounced through clenched teeth.

"Surely there are better agents, that is, more distinguished ones to help the Canadian

police?" Scully remarked, knowing just where the agents who worked the X Files stood in the Agency pecking order.

"The Toronto Police..."

"And Commissioner Vetter..." Mulder figured.

Skinner nodded. "And Commissioner Vetter feel that Tracy Vetter's disappearance extends beyond the realm of normal police work."

"Why?" Mulder and Scully asked simultaneously.

At this question, Skinner twitched. "Because of certain circumstances, the Toronto Police and Commissioner Vetter, wanted investigators who were more experienced in..."

"Alien abductions?" Mulder cheerfully asked, starting at the top of a hypothetical list of reasons as to why one government would want the help of agents from another government. Normally police departments, even provincial ones, did not like much less request outside help.

Skinner barely stifled a curse as he shook his head in denial. "No, this is not an alien abduction."

"Then, what, Sir?" Scully quickly asked before Mulder could start verbally reciting his alphabetical possibilities.

"Tracy Vetter wrote some peculiar things in her diary..."

"Which Commissioner Vetter read when she disappeared..." Mulder added.

Skinner agreed. "Yes. And the diary contained certain elements, coupled with other evidence and suspicions..." He stood and walked over to his window, peering out through the blinds at the sunlight for a quick respite.

"And?" Mulder asked again. "Don't hold us in suspense too much longer, Sir." He grinned at Scully, guessing that she was annoyed with him by this point. For a brief moment he stared at her, thinking that she looked awfully pretty today. He wished that he could tell her so.

"And, Tracy Vetter apparently knew, or at least thought that she knew someone who was... a vampire." The words rushed out of Skinner's mouth as if saying them quickly would make them sound less idiotic.

"A vampire?" Scully turned and looked at Mulder, her blue eyes filled with suspicious accusations.

Mulder raised his hands in mock defense to ward off her doubtful glare. "Honest, Scully. Not even I could have guessed this!" He quickly looked back over at Skinner who had returned to his armchair. "Tell her, Sir."

Skinner could see a wee bit of humor in this discussion. So he almost smiled as he explained, "Agent Scully, why else do you think that I would approve a reimbursement voucher for custom made silver bullets?"

Scully wearily leaned back into her chair. "Blood sucking vampire abductions... And the Canadian Government and the United States Government are taking all of this quite seriously."

"Well, Commissioner Vetter understands the situation well enough that he wants to call in the experts, even if they are from the United States. And in a case like this the only experts that there are..." He suddenly grinned, enjoying their discomfiture, "...are the pair of you."

"I always had a hunch that I was a direct descendant of Van Helsing," Mulder mumbled.

Skinner ignored Mulder as his expression reverted back to its normal stern appearance. "Anyway, Commissioner Vetter feels that there might be a coven of vampires...."

"Shouldn't that be a belfry of vampires?" Mulder asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"Actually, it should be a gathering of vampires," Scully asserted, disregarding the twinkle.

"Really, Scully? You are that familiar with vampire terminology?" Mulder was amused at this notion. "I bet that you read it somewhere. Anne Rice?"

"LeFanu and Lori Herter," Scully remarked. Then she pointedly disregarded her partner, directing her attention back to Skinner.

"Commissioner Vetter requested the U.S. Government's assistance in this matter, and it has been decided that we will cooperate. Provided that you agree, of course."

"Of course," Mulder formally agreed.

Dana shivered then sighed. "Toronto in February. I wonder what the odds are that there will be more snow?"

Skinner's boss-like behavior faded for a moment. He almost appeared cordial. "I've been to Toronto in the winter. Wear rubbers."

"Thank you, Sir." Then Scully stood, and reached over to pick up the file that Skinner was now offering to her.

"Your tickets, itinerary and pertinent information are inside," Skinner explained, with little emotion. "Oh, and there is just one more thing..."

"There always is." This time it was Scully who was mumbling observations under her breath.

"And that is, Sir?" Mulder asked with the appropriate attitude of deference to his superior.

"Tracy Vetter's partner - a Detective Nick Knight...."

Scully could see the wheels turning inside of Mulder's noggin at the announcement of the name of Detective Tracy Vetter's partner. She quickly sidestepped any declaration that Mulder might care to make with, "What, Sir?"

Skinner paused as if he were mentally gathering strength unto himself before he got around to answering her. "Detective Knight apparently has some sort of unusual and somewhat exotic skin disease. He's allergic to the sun. You can only meet with him at night."

"Thank you, Sir," Scully breathlessly responded, dragging then practically shoving Mulder toward the door in her haste to get him out of the office before he started expounding upon anything and everything. Not to mention the odds of Tracy Vetter's partner being a vampire...

"Don't you dare say it!" she warned. "Skinner meant boots..."

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"Whoa!" Mulder stopped dead in his tracks to stare at a blue convertible with big fins and shiny chrome bumpers. "Now that is what I call a classy, classic car."

Scully stood next to her partner and looked about the police parking lot. "I hope the owner isn't a cop."

"Huh?"

She brushed aside some snow off of a tail fin. "It doesn't say much about the intelligence of the Toronto Police Department if one of their members has his convertible top down at night in the dead of winter."

Mulder looked about the back of the car at the folded white top. "Maybe the roof is stuck."

"Maybe we should go inside and meet this Captain Joseph Reese and Commissioner Vetter instead, Mulder."

Distracted, Mulder looked at his partner, then smiled. "Oh, yeah. Right. We mustn't forget how important a man Commissioner Vetter is."

"Mulder, it is his daughter that is missing."

"You want to bet that she got cabin fever and is skinny dipping somewhere sunny and steamy?"

"Without telling her partner? Or her family?"

"Not every disappearance is the result of extraterrestrial abduction, Agent Scully." By the look on Dana's face he knew that he had touched upon a still sensitive nerve, so he quickly changed the subject. "You know, maybe if we can solve this case soon enough, we can go see PHANTOM OF THE OPERA. I heard that the Canadian version is a lot better than what is playing on Broadway right now." A teasing look confirmed Scully's interest in his words. "I might even buy you a souvenir tee shirt. If you're a good girl, that is."

Even knowing that she was losing the skirmish, she still felt compelled to say the words regardless of the foolishness of them. "Mulder, be serious."

"When have you ever known me not to be?" As she searched for the appropriate response, he thought of something else. "When was the last time we got an all-expense paid trip to some place that was truly civilized like Toronto? Usually we are voyaging to the center of the earth via a volcanic lava tube, freezing our buns off chasing after worms at the North Pole, growing old together on a stinkin' steamer, or stepping over killer cows patties in some little blip of a town due north of Twin Peaks."

Not bothering to react, walking away from him, Scully went inside the police station expecting Mulder to follow. After conferring one more yearning glance in the direction of the

vintage Cadillac convertible, Mulder went after his partner.

It was a police station like countless others in which they had drunk lousy coffee together. Metallic desks, fake oak wood topped conference tables, and chipped walls painted with a sick green color that no self-respecting decorator would ever willingly choose without extreme coercion.

After they presented themselves to several different officers, they were finally directed to Captain Reese's tiny office.

Once the introduction were done and the credentials established, Scully got right down to business.

"Captain Reese, I would like to inspect Tracy Vetter's apartment, read her diary, check her cases open as well as closed, talk with her fellow policemen, friends and neighbors..."

Mulder quickly spoke up. "And that's just what Agent Scully wants to do tonight, Captain Reese. As for myself, I'd like another cup of your excellent coffee, and then I think that I should have a little chat with Detective Vetter's partner, Nick Knight." He couldn't help himself. He snickered when he said the detective's name.

Captain Joseph Reese leaned back in his desk chair and studied the two FBI agents. They came highly recommended, but still he wondered. Scully appeared to be what one would expect of an agent. But Mulder seemed rather unconventional. On the other hand, Reese was accustomed to working with detectives who were outside of the ordinary.

Reese stood, and nodded, as if in agreement to everything that they'd said. "Detective Knight is in the morgue. Maybe your first order of business should be to talk with him."

Scully politely agreed with Reese, then asked, "Captain Reese, is there anything unusual about Detective Knight that we should know?"

"If by that question, you're asking me about his disability, well, I can tell you that the only thing unusual about Detective Knight is how many cases he solves. He's got the highest resolution rate in this precinct."

"Does that include Detective Vetter's rate as well?" Mulder asked.

"She's his partner."

But Scully still was curious. "About Detective Knight's disability..."

"He's allergic to the sun," Reese gruffly stated.

Mulder quickly asked, standing, going around the desk to be near the door. "What happens when he is exposed? Does he ooze?"

"Mulder!" Scully threatened under her breath, not caring if Reese really heard. "What Mulder meant to ask was what kind of symptoms does Detective Knight display when exposed?"

"Well, I've only seen Detective Knight in the daylight, one time. And to answer your questions, he didn't ooze, Agent Mulder. His skin singed, sort of like what happens with a chemical burn. It wasn't a pretty sight. And considering the amount of pain that Nick was in when that happened, I can understand why he avoided sunlight at all costs."

There were times when Scully resembled a feral creature with whetted fangs plunged deep into a bloody morsel. Such as now. She was a mortal who had no intention of ever giving up the tidbit between her teeth until she was inclined to do so.

"Why did Detective Vetter reference vampires in her diary?"

"I, uh, don't know. Perhaps she was thinking of writing a book." It was the first possibility that Captain Reese could think of, and even to his ears, it sounded sort of weak. "You know... one of those romance types..." Reese thought that his lame explanation was only making matters seem worse.

"Has she ever mentioned similar beings, interests or possibilities to you in the past, Captain Reese?"

Reese stared at Scully. And he began to understand the reasons for this lady's legendary reputation held in certain computer chat rooms. Yet, how could he tell these agents about Vetter's recent belief that she had encountered ghosts? And that those ghosts had helped her to solve a murder case? He shuddered as he considered what to do.

"Go talk to her partner. If anyone can find Detective Vetter, it is her partner." He paused for a moment before he added, "And Agents..."

"Yes, Captain Reese?" Scully replied.

"No one outside of Commissioner Vetter, her partner or your Mr. Skinner knows about what Detective Vetter wrote in her diary." Reese cleared his throat. "I would not want any outlandish rumors to damage the lady's professional reputation should she be returned to us..."

Scully quickly assented. "I concur, Captain Reese. We will be careful in how we ask our questions and in our choice of questions."

Mulder agreed too. "Right, Captain. No calls to HARD COPY today..."

*

"It is her blood, isn't it Natalie?"

Dr. Natalie Lambert looked at the man she loved and paused before giving him an answer, wishing that she could tell him something other than the truth. But she had no choice. Not when it came to Nick.

"Yes, Nick, it is Tracy's blood." She placed her hand on Nick's tense arm. "But that doesn't mean that it is proof that Tracy is dead, Nick. I've analyzed the amount that was found in her car. There wasn't that much, only a few milliliters."

"Unless the carjackers dragged her out of the car before they killed her." He couldn't believe that he was actually saying these words. "I cannot imagine that I've lost another partner again, much less lost her to something as senseless as vicious carjackers."

"Oh Nick..." She put her arms around him and hugged him, hoping to offer him at least some comfort, even if he would accept nothing else from her.

Natalie nodded into his broad chest, denying Nick's words. "She is too tough a lady to be done in by mindless thieves."

"No, Natalie. That tough lady that you describe, she is you and only you. But Trace - she has her weaknesses. She will never have the kind of inner strength and courage of mind and heart that you possess. I just hope that her determination to try and overcome her faults didn't end up getting her killed."

Natalie lifted her face to gaze into his steely blue eyes. "You have no sense of her? You cannot tell by the scent of her blood..."

"No, Natalie. Nothing." His grin was ironic as he explained, "I have lost my taste for blood..."

Just outside of a slightly ajar morgue door, Mulder whispered to Scully, "Now that is sort of lover's nonsense that I wish that you'd whisper to me..."

Scully mentally sighed, wondering yet again how she could work so well with Mulder, trust him with her heart, mind and professional soul, and yet find herself spending time after time having to ignore him in order to get her work done.

Just as they were about to enter the morgue, they heard Natalie say something even more interesting.

"Nick, have you contacted your friends - Vachon? And the others?"

"I haven't had that much of a chance to get a hold of any of them. The past two nights I've had to spend with Tracy's father and Captain Reese. Other than leaving several messages for LaCroix, I have not had any current communication with my special circle of friends."

"Mulder, I don't think that we should be eavesdropping," Scully whispered, curious about what she was hearing, but also knowing that they were treading into a very murky ethical area. "We might misconstrue their conversation."

"But Scully, we learn more when we eavesdrop. And it is more fun." But he could see that she was determined to protest if only on principle, so he motioned toward the morgue door. "After you."

She pushed open the door with enough force to bang it against the back wall, and called out loud, "Detective Knight?"

Natalie stepped away at the sound of Scully's voice. They both looked at the two people entering the morgue.

"The Crown asked us to help," Scully explained as she stepped closer to them, flashing her

identification. "I'm Agent Scully and this is Agent Mulder. We're FBI."

On their puzzled looks, Mulder mentioned in his own peculiar style of studied nonchalance, "Commissioner Vetter arranged for the loan of our specific services to your government." He pointedly looked at Nick, scrutinizing the man, trying to decide if he looked like a vampire. "Detective Knight, would you mind if I asked you a few questions about your partner?"

"No." Glancing at Natalie with a look full of unspoken questions, he added, "Of course not. Agent Mulder, isn't it?"

"Yes. I'm Mulder."

As Knight shook Mulder's hand, the two men studied each other, each wondering what the other was about. "This Dr. Natalie Lambert. Dr. Lambert and I consider Tracy Vetter to be our friend, as well as our colleague. We both will do anything to help bring her back to where she belongs."

Mulder lazily perused Natalie Lambert, finding a good deal to admire in the way that she looked. And though it was obvious from her protective stance toward Detective Knight that she was emotionally involved with the man, as well as the fact that she was a lady intelligent enough to become a medical doctor, Mulder could still appreciate a good looking woman even if she were entangled with someone else.

Scully turned a blind eye to Mulder's inspection. "Dr. Lambert?"

"Yes, Agent Scully?" Lambert had been aware of Mulder's personal perusal but it mattered little to her at the moment. She concentrated on Agent Scully.

"May I see whatever medical and personnel reports that you have on Detective Tracy Vetter?"

Natalie automatically glanced over at Nick for silent permission before she went to retrieve Tracy's file.

Sensing that there might be a protocol problem, Scully hastily mentioned, "Captain Reese gave us permission."

Natalie handed several files to Dana. "Some of the medical reports are somewhat technical."

"Agent Scully is a medical doctor," Mulder explained, having reached some conclusions about her, but was still trying to take the measure of the man who was Vetter's partner.

Scully neatly packed the files away in her briefcase. "I'll study these later. Right now I want to examine Detective Vetter's apartment. Commissioner Vetter made mention of a personal diary that contained some interesting and perhaps informative passages."

Scully noted that Detective Knight was surprised by the mention of Vetter's diary. "You didn't know that your partner kept a diary, Detective Knight?"

Nick disregarded her question. "The evidence suggests that my partner is apparently the victim of a carjacking." He shook his head in denial. "I don't see how any scribblings in her diary can be of any help to locating her." He sensed that they were perplexed by his attitude. He tried to correct any possible misimpressions. "Tracy has quite an active imagination. But she is not the Oracle at Delphi. Not even she could have foretold a carjacking."

"I see." Scully raised an eyebrow as she considered Knight's words. "You are probably correct, Detective Knight. But still, I would like to examine everything that might shed some light on Tracy Vetter's whereabouts. Do you have any objections?"

"No, of course not."

Natalie interrupted them. "Agent Scully, why don't I take you over to Tracy Vetter's apartment. You can scrutinize to your heart's content." She turned and faced Nick. "Eh, Nick. Does that sound okay to you?"

"Right, Natalie. And I'll take Agent Mulder over to where Tracy's car is impounded. And then from there we will retrace Tracy's probable routes, one more time."

As they were leaving the morgue, Mulder casually asked, "By chance do you drive a vintage blue Cadillac Convertible, Detective Knight?"

"As a matter of fact I do. Is there a problem, Agent Mulder?"

"No. Not at all. I noticed the car in the parking lot. And I happen to be a big fan of big fins..."

As they walked down the hall toward an exit, Natalie thought that she heard Agent Scully mutter under her breath, "Men..."

*

A few hours before dawn, Dana Scully got up from the desk where she had been reading and stretched, trying to work away some of the kinks that were currently controlling her spine. She had been studying Tracy Vetter's files and her diary for several hours now with little sense of accomplishment. She was still reading in Tracy's apartment, trying to get a sense of the woman as she worked.

Natalie Lambert had left several hours ago, having been paged by her office. Dana had commiserated with the lady, explaining that she too, knew what it was like to have to go to a tomb-cold morgue lab in the middle of the night.

Going into Tracy's small kitchen, Dana checked the warmth of the tea kettle on the stove and decided that the water within was still hot enough to make at least one more cup of tea.

Dana could not shake the feeling that she was being watched. Yet she knew that it was highly improbable. She'd checked the windows of this upper story apartment several times as well as double checked the hallway door. There was no way anybody could be peering in through the windows. And yet, her uneasiness still persisted. Even though she would not care to admit such sentiments out loud to Mulder, he had taught her to be more aware of her intuitive feelings. And her feelings were telling her that there was something wrong, somewhere.

She shivered, wrapping her hands around the tea mug for some additional warmth.

"All of that talk about vampires, and now ghosts. I must be letting Mulder logic get to me...." she announced to the empty room, hearing her voice echo off of the plainly painted walls.

She had to wonder about the level of intelligence of the missing detective who had written in her diary that ghosts had come across the threshold between the worlds in order to avenge the wrongs that had occurred when the spirits had been alive. A case that Tracy had solved with Nick a few months ago had been filled with references to other-wordly help. And then, of course, there were the erotic fantasies concerning some being named 'Vachon'...

About thirty minutes later, there was a loud crash from outside the apartment, followed by some shrill screaming.

Drawing her gun, Dana opened the hallway door and looked about. Hearing someone running down the back stairs, she chased after the sound, trying to find out what was occurring.

On the lower floor landing there was a woman yelling something about a man having broken into her apartment. She saw the gun in Scully's hand and assumed that Scully was some sort of police person. Dana found herself cornered as she listened to the frightened woman's tale. And as other residents of the building surrounded them, it took Dana quite a while to straighten the matter out.

Dana investigated and found nothing. And since she was already there with Tracy's neighbors, she started asking questions of her own about the disappearance of Tracy Vetter.

Almost an hour later, Dana was no closer to solving the mystery of Tracy Vetter. Or about the vampires. For Tracy's diary had contained some very peculiar passages about the missing lady's confrontations with the children of the night in some abandoned church somewhere.

Wearily walking up the steps back to Tracy's apartment, she encountered a man. A portly man brushed by Dana going down the stairs, almost knocking Dana off of her step. He'd been coming from the direction of Tracy's apartment, carrying a suitcase, though it took Dana a moment to comprehend it.

"Hey!" Dana uttered, startled by his presence. She had not seen him before. When she actually realized this fact she went racing off after the man, trying to catch up with him. He had some questions to answer.

But he had disappeared. After pounding on several doors, Dana came to the reluctant conclusion that no one had seen the man. No one knew who he was. And no one knew where the portly man in the out-of-date olive polyester suit had gone.

*

An inspection of Tracy's car had divulged nothing new about her disappearance.

It had been a long day for Mulder after his flight, the meeting at the precinct, and having spent almost an hour in the Toronto night's winter cold inspecting a car that had few secrets to reveal. Mulder was tired.

Mulder slumped against the backrest of Knights car, appreciatively studying the padded Cadillac dashboard. Mulder discussed that fact with the enigmatic man driving the car. And when that conversation was bled dry, Mulder got around to asking one of the more pressing things that was on his mind.

"They don't make cars like this beautiful baby any more," Mulder remarked as he fondled a radio knob. For a moment both men seemed in accord with each other. "You mind if I ask you a question, Detective?"

"Depends."

"About the car?"

"Sure."

"Why is your top down in the middle of winter, Knight?"

Knight laughed, amused by Mulder's attitude. "I could say that I am cold blooded Canadien..."

"Really?"

Knight almost laughed. "But the truth is, the top is stuck. I meant to take it in to have it fixed, but I've been rather busy the past few nights. I haven't had the time. And I can't go during the day." He turned his head and speculatively eyed Mulder. "I presume that someone has told you of my unusual health problem?"

"Yes. We have been informed. I must admit that I am curious about it."

"Don't worry, Agent Mulder. You won't catch anything through casual contact."

"Hereditary?"

"Not exactly."

"It's a disease of the blood, then?"

For a moment Knight didn't answer him. Agent Mulder sounded innocent enough as if his question was nothing more than just a casual inquiry. And yet, there was something in the man's eyes that indicated a cleverness that was not to be treated with cavalier disregard. Knight had learned a long time ago to trust his inner sense of estimation when it came to mortals. He considered just how much this FBI agent might really know. And just how much might be mere speculation. Knight had the sense that he would have to proceed with utmost caution when dealing with this man.

"Not exactly."

Mulder had the unmistakable impression that Knight was not going to answer any more personal questions. And he was right.

They drove for a while until Knight whipped the steering wheel about rather swiftly, changing direction, going into a seedier part of the city. Mulder started to pay attention to where they were going. A few minutes later they were in the parking lot of a rather disreputable establishment known as the RAVEN.

"What is this place, Detective Knight?" Mulder scanned the surroundings noting what appeared to be abandoned buildings midst an aura of dissoluteness. The denizens of the night that lurked in the corners around here were proffering the darkest vices of mankind for a profit.

"It's a rather low rent establishment," Knight explained as he stared at those who had started to approach his car with their illicit wares. But once the scum had recognized him, they scattered.

"Sounds like my kind of place."

"It's also a night club, Agent Mulder." As he got out of the car Nick supplied some more information. "Some of Tracy Vetter's friends like to come here. I want to find out if anyone knows anything."

"Or are in to blood sports."

Knight slammed his car door shut. "What?"

"A while ago I was involved with a case in California. The participants were in to blood sports."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

Mulder stared directly at Night's face. "Kinkiness, Nick Knight. Major immane kinkiness." He jerked his head toward the building. "This looks like that kind of place."

"What?"

"Somehow, I get the feeling that you haven't read any entries in Tracy Vetter's diary."

Knight stifled a choked, disbelieving laugh. "I want to live, Agent Mulder. If Tracy is still alive, and I believe that she is, if she ever found out that I had read her private diary - well, as I said - I want to live."

Oddly enough, Mulder could understand. He remembered what it had been like going through Scully's personal things and papers, intruding into her life after her disappearance. He could appreciate Knight's hesitancy to violate his partner's privacy. It was not something that a partner did without considering all of the potential consequences.

"Much as I hate to say it, Knight, you may have to read her diary if we don't get any solid leads real soon. You may be the only one who can put the pieces together to form an answer."

Mulder began to amble toward the entrance when Knight grabbed his left arm, stopping him.

"You've been implying something since the moment you introduced yourself, Mulder. As if you know something that I don't know about my partner. Now, what is it?"

Mulder inspected the man wondering about how much he should reveal.

"You haven't a clue as to why Agent Scully and I have been called in on the case, have you Knight?"

"No. What makes you and Agent Scully so special?"

"We're the X Files."

Knight only looked perplexed at this information.

"Should I be impressed? Bow homage to your X File expertise? What about Y or Zed?"

"Well, amongst other things, the X File agents look into unexplained phenomena for the Violent Crimes division of the FBI." He waited for Knight to react. When he didn't, Mulder added, "And we investigate paranormal activities."

Centuries of experience had taught Knight how to conceal his emotional reactions. A man of lesser years would have been indiscreet.

"So what has this to do with Tracy Vetter?"

"Like I said before. I think that the lady is connected to those who play the blood sports." This time Nick reacted with a purposefully blank look.

"Tracy Vetter's diary indicated that she was involved with people who liked to do them. Some other people might refer to these activities as vampire sports."

"And so you think that I must be caught up with her disappearance because you think that I am a vampire? Because of the circumstances of my health problems?"

"You could say that."

"Agent Mulder, you've been reading too much Anne Rice."

"Funny, I accused my partner of something similar just a while ago."

Knight hit his hands together, blowing steaming air on to his fingertips. "I don't know about you, Mulder, but it is cold tonight. I am going inside. If you would rather stay out here and freeze to death, be my guest."

Mulder chuckled. "Why do I get the feeling that I am sticking my neck out if I go inside with you?"

"You are either a very brave man, Mulder, or one of the most incredibly dense and foolish people I have ever encountered during my long life."

"Are you trying to get rid of me, Knight?"

"Agent Mulder, have you considered the possibility that your suspicions are correct and that I really am a vampire? What would you do if I were? Do you know how much danger that you'd be in then?"

"Actually Detective Knight, I'd offer to buy you a drink and ask you to tell me all about it. And then I'd drag you over to confess to my partner, off the record of course."

"Of course."

Mulder laughed.

"What's so amusing, Agent Mulder?"

"You don't know what I'd give just for once to be able to see Scully's face when she is not able to come up with a rational, scientific explanation for everything that we encounter. I'd offer to buy you a double Bloody Mary if you would care to lie to her for me."

"I don't drink... tomato juice."

Knight then ignored Mulder though he did hold the door open for him as they entered the RAVEN. His senses were focused on finding his friends, or others of his kind that might have had something to do with his missing partner. A moment later Knight loudly cursed in several languages not known to Mulder.

"Damn?" Mulder suggested. "Damn what?" The band was only playing at a dull roar so Mulder could yell above it.

Knight chose an epithet in English. "Damn, no one is here."

"Who?"

Knight grimly smiled for a second as if he were pondering just how to answer this question. Then he said, "I suppose you could say my illustrious leader, but then, illustrious might be a misnomer."

Instead of waiting for Mulder to respond, Knight went to the bar where he was greeted with a kiss on the cheek by a rather friendly waitress in a skintight black dress with an outrageously low decolletage.

Mulder got close enough to hear some phrases in French. And though he did speak French, he couldn't hear everything being said.

"What did she say?" Mulder yelled after she went away.

"LaCroix. He is not here."

Knight guided Mulder over to a slightly quieter corner.

"Who's LaCroix?"

"A Night Crawler. He does a radio show out of this place at night. And he is someone who knows someone who is a friend of Tracy's. They left a message for me to come and see them."

Mulder turned toward the door. Knight stopped him again.

"I have to go alone. They won't talk to me if they see you with me."

"Why's that?"

"Let's just say that they don't like Americans."

"How would they know that I am an American?"

"LaCroix has exceptional senses."

"What?"

"Or it could be your taste in ties."

With this Knight left the bar, knowing that Mulder would follow. But Knight chose not to drive, so he left behind his Cadillac and a very puzzled Mulder who was wondering how a mortal man could disappear in the middle of the night so quickly.

*

"I don't think that I am doing this right," she moaned.

Vachon mightily sighed, wishing that the dawn was closer to coming than it really was. He felt sorely tempted to greet the sun personally this morning. Another few hours in Tracy Vetter's presence might be enough incentive for this vampire to commit suicide. The prospect of eternal life with Tracy Vetter could do that to a vampire.

"Tracy, you cannot drink blood through a straw."

"But why not?"

"Because that is not the way that it is done."

On her blank, petulant look, Vachon sighed again, sorely tempted to fly away and find another place to nest.

"The blood lust loses something in the translation, so to speak, if the victim's life blood..." On Tracy's instinctive gagging at this piece of information, LaCroix amended the information that he was providing. "That is, your life giving sustenance must cross directly over your fangs and glide down your pretty little throat to feed your silly little brain."

LaCroix was finding much amusement in Vachon's predicament.

"Euuuu... Yucky yuck!" was her response. She hadn't paid any attention to LaCroix's disparagement. After the past few nights, she was getting used to it.

"Oh, you indelicate creature..." LaCroix muttered.

"But I'm still hungry!"

"Enough!" LaCroix roared, slamming his hand down onto a pew railing, rattling the panes of the surviving unbroken stained glass that was in this part of the abandoned church. "You came to us, remember? You did not want to die. You asked us to bring you across. You knew what being a vampire would entail." LaCroix took a great breath, then threatened, "And if you do not cease your infernal whining, I will give you to the one amongst us who loves his rats."

"No..." she moaned.

"Big rats. Juicy rats. Pet rats."

"No..."

"And Screed will be the one who will have to teach you how to survive as a vampire in order to join my distinguished entourage. Do you comprehend your predicament, Miss Vetter? Or would you care to greet the dawn with a smile and a song, and then do as you Christians recommend, become 'dust to dust'..."

Tears rolled down her cheeks, leaving trails of streaks in the grime that had accumulated over the past few days. "I'm hungry and I want to go home!" she wailed.

Vachon sat on the edge of the bed, and hugged her, offering comfort. He didn't like the way that LaCroix was behaving. And one did have to consider just how much trauma Tracy had undergone during the past few days.

"LaCroix, you go too far. None of us has to drink the blood of rats and you know it! Stop haranguing the poor girl. If you must say something, at least make it something practical."

A voice from the back of the church commented, "But some of us like rat blood! What's wrong with rat blood?"

Fortunately, Screed was ignored one more time. He was used to it.

Tracy raised her head and looked at Vachon with eyes brimming with adoration at his defense of her.

"You would prefer pet poodles, then?" LaCroix sneered.

"What?" she howled.

"You have to eat, my dear detective." He levitated over the top of the bed, the drape of his black cape fluttering about, as he leered down at her. He made a most daunting sight.

"But eat what?" she gasped, shuddering at the possibilities of her future.

A moan from the foot of Vachon's bed capture her attention. She goggled at the unconscious man that was thrown over the edge of the footboard.

"Well, if you must know, his name is Freddie," Vachon mumbled. At her stunned, uncomprehending expression he added, "Freddie volunteers his neck once in a while, provided we pay for a good day's drunk. And a bit extra renumeration for his services. He's a perfectly harmless choice for practicing on how to be a vampire. And as an added bonus, you won't get a hangover anymore from imbibing, like the one that will have Freddie when he wakes up. You might find that the vodka in his bloodstream adds a little kick." Vachon nervously looked up toward the arched window. "And morning is coming upon our kind far too quickly at the moment. If you don't eat now, you won't be able to get a little nip until supper time tonight."

"And you will be so ravenous when night falls that you will ravage any warm blooded being that you can first ensnare, be it mouse or man, much to the detriment of the rest of us," LaCroix sneered. "We do have a code of behavior you know. And you will learn it or else." He pointed at the man now passed out on the bed. "Drink."

Tracy gulped then squeaked. "Isn't there some other way?"

Vachon shook his head as eh pleaded. "Drink."

LaCroix was not pleased with her missish behavior and his attitude let her know it. But he relented a bit at her continuing pathetic looks. "But not too much," he warned. "If Freddie dies, I will personally turn you over to the police myself."

With this comforting thought, Tracy started wailing again. But she did sink her new-found

fangs into poor Freddie's neck. Though she had to take several stabs at it.

When she was finally sated and abed, LaCroix drifted over to where Vachon hid in the choir loft.

"Poor Freddie. His neck looks like it was attacked by a giant calamari. All of those red puncture marks. I trust that we will not have to send him to emergency."

LaCroix eyed one of the newer members to his group. Vachon did have a point even if he had been brought across by an Incan of all creatures. "Ah, the kindred these days just are not like they used to be. We both were born into eras where style and taste meant something more than instant gratification. But now... look at what we get to amuse us."

At this particular moment, one of the newest members to the group approached his master.

"Vachon!"

"Yes?" Vachon looked at the man that he had brought across only a few months earlier, in an uncharacteristic moment of pity. The newcomer had become used to the ways of the kindred. But he had acquired none of their outward polish and mysteriousness. The man in the olive polyester suit still looked like he was more comfortable drinking beer in front of a television set than he was drinking blood from beer drinkers in back alleys.

"I brought her some clothes." He put down a suitcase.

Now LaCroix was the sort of vampire that could easily be envisioned drinking the blood from a victim lulled into a subtle seduction at one moment, and then be capable of riving the heart out of an adversary with studied insouciance at the next.

The newcomer in the polyester suit was definitely not LaCroix's preference for an appropriate acolyte, someone willing to submissively learn at the Italian well-shod feet of this exacting master. But, considering that it was Vachon who had brought this man across, (under what could only be described as further proof of the perils of flying a bargain airline or displaying a dismaying lack of discrimination in travel companions with whom one shares an aisle seat), LaCroix was not exactly surprised at this man's lack of that elusive sangfroid quality that was part of the foundation for the prevalent vampire legend.

For former Detective Schenke was the kind of vampire who still preferred watching baseball games even if he did have to hide in the rafters over Toronto's Sky Dome at night rather than spend the hours of darkness with other denizens of the night at the RAVEN. He still thought that one day he would be able to be reunited with his family and return to his mundane life. And he didn't understand that he wasn't quite yet ready to return to the night life of being a Toronto police detective either.

And now, he had brought across the partner of his partner.

LaCroix mentally mused about the blind (and batty) leading the blonde.

He was also giving LaCroix a most unearthly rare headache.

*

"You did what?"

Mulder mumbled something.

"Then he did what?"

Mulder mumbled something again.

Dana paced about the living room of her understated luxurious peach and ecru suite at the Royal York. Both agents had been somewhat surprised at the gracious suites they'd been assigned, but they had been informed that they were guests of the Ontario Provincial Government at the bequest of Commissioner Vetter. Though Dana would have protested at such unanticipated luxury as individual suites in a world famous hotel, Fox convinced her that for once, they should accept someone else largesse. It couldn't atone for all of the bad motel rooms in sleazy trailer parks or inedible food such as larded sweet potato pies that they'd endured in the past. But room service at the Royal York would help balance the score a little. Why should they suffer every single time they went out on a case?

Dana eyed her confederate with growing displeasure as she watched him polish off her piece of an almond gateau with framboise sauce.

"Are you sure you don't want some of this, Scully?" he mumbled. "We could order some more.

You know, the food here is good enough almost to convince me to join the Mounties."
"Mulder..." she warned.

He took a long swig of his LaBatt's Blue and voiced a long, drawn-out sigh. "So this is what beer is supposed to taste like...", he muttered to himself. And then he returned his attention to his partner.

"Knight left the RAVEN like a bat out of hell." He took another gulp of beer. "Funny thing is, he left his version of a batmobile behind. I drove it here and parked it in the hotel's garage. I haven't a clue as to where Knight went, or how he got there. Maybe he flew."

She glared at him. "Mulder, am I going to have to work on this case all by myself while you chase after who knows what outlandish myth?" She sat down next to him and poured herself another cup of Earl Grey tea. "Mulder, I've met Knight, remember? Granted, he is a bit peculiar. But, he is also a highly respected police detective. He is **not** a vampire."

Mulder considered her words. "You know. You might be right. Now if he were a blood-sucking barrister..."

"Mulder, get out of here. It's been a very long day and I want to go to bed." She saw that look in his eye and knew that he was about to say something not acceptable to the regulations governing a field agent's behavior. "Alone," she emphasized, as she nodded toward the suite's door.

For a brief instant, Mulder wondered what would happen if he really tried to persuade Scully to let him stay. Instead, Mulder finished off his beer, stood, stretched, and then announced, "Of course you could be wrong, you know."

"What?"

"I had our friendly Lone Gunmen run a check on murders in Ontario whose sanguinary details never made it into the official reports, especially those killings that included victims whose blood had been drained."

"And?"

"A surprising number of really bizarre cases crossed over Nick Knight's desk." He thought for a moment. "I wonder... What if Knight's mother's last name had been 'Knack'? Think he changed his name?"

She shook her head ignoring Mulder's extemporaneous musings. "About those cases, were some of them ever resolved, Mulder?"

"What? Oh, you mean the cases. Yes. Knight put them to bed. What does that have to do with anything, Scully?"

"Mulder..."

"'Night, Scully," was his reply before he quickly left the suite, firmly shutting the door behind him before he yielded into temptation.

"Diet be damned," was Scully's retort as she contemplated decimation of the contents of the snack refrigerator.

The next morning, Mulder had only one thing on his mind. In the Royal York's coffee shop, he stared down at his table place setting. "Scully, why are there five spoons on my placemat?"

"This is a civilized establishment, Mulder. Mind your manners."

"Are you implying that my mother didn't raise me right?"

Dana only ignored him as she savored her braised grapefruit, gracefully wielding her citrus spoon amongst the pulpy sections.

"I suppose we could return Knight's car to him," Mulder suggested.

"You just want to wake him up so that you can see whether or not he sleeps in a coffin."

"Scully, how can you say that? The car is a classic. I am sure that Knight is worried about what happened to it."

"I'm sure that Knight hasn't checked out your driving record which is why he left his precious car in your care."

"Scully, I wouldn't talk about accident records if I were you. You're the one who sank the boat, remember?"

"So, after you return the Cadillac, then what?"

"Why do I think that you already have planned our schedule for the day and it won't include exploring The Beaches, or visiting any hidden passages at Casa Loma?"

"Tracy's diary referenced some sort of abandoned church where she used to meet her alleged vampire and his friends."

"Does this alleged vampire have a name?"

"She wrote rather lengthily about someone named 'Vachon'."

"And does her diary contain any mention of blood sucking activities? Or were her writings strictly of the salacious type?"

"Erotic fantasies, perhaps. But bloody?" She picked up her marmalade spoon and spread some of the orange stuff on a muffin. "No, not really. Though she did mention that Vachon was sick a while ago."

"Shit." Mulder put down his linen napkin, and pithily cursed again.

"What?"

"Vampires don't get sick, Scully. Our missing detective is a candidate for psychotropic drug therapy after all."

"Now you're an expert on vampire physiology?"

"Of course, Scully. That's why they wanted us, remember?"

Two hours later after they'd parked Knight's car at his police station and left a status report for Captain Reese, Mulder informed Scully of his good news. "There are only thirteen abandoned churches in the area."

They climbed into their forest green Crown Victoria landau sedan that had been assigned to them as their car.

"And the bad news?" Scully was always suspicious whenever Mulder seemed too sincere. Or when he was resetting every digital control on the car's dashboard.

"None of them are anywhere near College Street. I wanted to go to Cafe' Diplomatico in Little Italy for lunch."

"Mulder." She paused for a moment, looking into his hazel eyes, seeking the truth from him. "You really are not taking this case seriously, are you?"

"Scully, you know me and paranormal phenomenon."

She shook her head, denying his answer. "You believe in aliens who specialize in abducting human beings as part of a giant world-wide conspiracy orchestrated by various nation states. You believed that Skinner was attacked by a succubus. For heavens sake, you even believed in Big Blue. But now, you are saying to me that you actually do not believe in vampires?"

"Dracula is not the Tooth Fairy, Scully. And having a worn out copy of Frank Langella's version of the movie in your personal video library doesn't qualify you as a vampire believer, either." He started up the car. "Let's just say that I do not believe in **these** vampires. Now, let's go check out these churches, and see if we can find any trace of Tracy."

Happily, Mulder discovered that one of the abandoned churches was near Corso Italia, Toronto's emerging new Italian district.

In the late afternoon, hours after Mulder had lunched on calamari, calzone and gelato, Scully checked the map and announced, "We'll only be able to check out one more church since the daylight fades so quickly at this time of year. Then we can call it a day."

"But can we call it a night, Scully? You have to admit that vampires are into the hours when the sun goes down - and Toronto has world-class night life. Maybe we should check it out."

As she had been doing most of the day, she ignored him, picking her way over slush piles and avoiding icy patches, finding a way inside of this church.

Inside, it was as dark as Cancer Man's soul.

"Now what, Scully?" Mulder pointed his flashlight in the direction of a far wall. "Some of these old churches had burial places and cemeteries. Shall we go see if there are any tails in the crypts?"

"Wait, Mulder."

He stopped trying to work his way past a mound of tumbled down pews.

"What?"

"Sniff."

He sniffed. He didn't understand at first, but then he realized what she was smelling. "Wax... Candle smoke."

"Someone's been here recently, burning candles."

"Maybe it's the Canadian version of the homeless seeking sanctuary."

Scully flashed her light about. "Well, I don't think that there is anyone here, right now." "Anyone living, you mean."

"Whatever, Mulder. But..." Her light caught something, the movement of cloth, hung as if they were draperies. "What's over there?"

They forged ahead, climbing over a few more broken pews.

"Only a vampire could live here," Mulder muttered. "They can flap their wings over all of this junk, whereas we have to scale over it."

Scully suddenly froze, kicking something soft on the floor. For a second, she thought that it might be alive. Then she picked up a torn black leather jacket. "Mulder, Tracy Vetter was supposedly wearing a jacket like this when she disappeared." She flashed her light over it. "It's hard to tell for sure in this lighting, but the jacket appears to be stained with blood." She couldn't hide her noise of distaste as she made another discovery. "It also looks like it has been gnawed."

"Let us hope." On her inquiring look, he explained, "That the stains be from something disgusting rather than Vetter's blood, Scully." Mulder took the jacket from Scully and draped it over his arm.

A moment later they were carefully pulling aside the dirty, tattered curtains, discovering a bed within.

Mulder's foot accidentally kicked aside some empty wine bottles. The noise that they made echo about the church, startling some of the furry residents of the church. Mulder picked up one of the litre bottles and sniffed.

"Well, someone lives here, Scully. Besides the rats."

"Someone indeed does..." A soft voice floated down from the choir loft.

"Huh?" Mulder looked up.

They saw the dark figure of someone leaning over the rail of the choir loft. Even as they drew their weapons and aimed their flashlights on him, the figure swooped over the railing and slowly descended to their level, with a cloak of some sort fluttering about him. Mulder's light beam caught a dangling rope. "Now where did that come from..." he muttered to Scully, since the rope seemed to just have appeared from nowhere.

"Must I call the police," the cloaked figure asked as he landed, moving closer to them. "Or, are you the police?" He shrugged off his cloak. "If so, then why have you invaded my home without a warrant?" He stared at Dana, a piercing look as if he were searching for some sign of her very soul. "Or, is that not the way it is done in the United States of America?"

Dana shuddered. But it was Mulder who answered the question.

"I am Agent Mulder and this is Agent Scully of the FBI."

"I believe that you are a little north of where you belong, Agent Mulder. Too macho to stop and ask for directions?"

Mulder warily watched the man as he walked about the barrier free area near the bed, lighting the standing torchieres with a taper. "We're on special assignment to the Toronto Police," he answered, lowering his gun, but still keeping it in his hand.

"My name is Vachon."

Dana started at the sound of this name. She put away her gun, as she studied Vachon trying to form an opinion about the man before her, a man that was most certainly a suspect. For one thing, his hair was curlier and longer than hers. The sleeves to his flowing poet style white shirt almost glowed in the near dark of the church. He wasn't as tall as Mulder, but there was an underlying grace and athletic strength to his movement suggesting that he would be a formidable opponent in a fight. And there was one more disturbing thing about Vachon. He was scrutinizing Scully with the same intensity that she was directing toward him.

"You said that you live here?" She had to clear her throat.

"Yes." He walked around her, as if her were inspecting her from every angle. From the corner of his eye, Vachon could see that Mulder was becoming a little perturbed by his quizzing of Scully.

"I purchased this property a few months ago."

Mulder came over and stood by Scully, his posturing was defensive, protective of his partner. "And you have made this place your haunt, sweet haunt?"

Vachon slightly smiled, his perfect teeth gleaming in the light from Mulder's flashlight. "Yes."

"With all the comforts of home," Mulder suggested, not bothering to hide his incredulity.

"Not quite yet," Vachon coolly replied. "But someday soon, this place will be a respite where one can soothe the savage breast..." He pointedly stared at Scully's chest.

"Mr. Vachon..." Scully began, glad that the gloom of the church was hiding her flush.

"Technically, it is Senor Vachon, but you may call me Vachon. I am aware of how fond you Americans are for informality."

"Vachon..." Scully began again.

"There is no mystery here, Agent Scully. I live here with my companion, because if I do not, all of the extensive restoration that I am doing to this church will be vandalized or removed by my less-than-respectable neighbors. I must stay here to watch over my work."

"Your work?" Mulder's skepticism was bordering on rude behavior, as he moved his flashlight about, but couldn't detect any signs of 'work' in this part of the church.

"You could say that Vachon is into historic preservation," a voice announced from behind them, requiring their immediate attention. "As are we all."

"Come in, mon ami," Vachon said by way of pleasant greeting to a man who was not quite his nemesis, yet not quite his friend, either. "Come and meet my visitors, LaCroix."

Scully and Mulder stared at the man dressed in funereal black. He could only be described as a commanding presence, though if it weren't for the pallor of his white face, he would easily have been unseen, blending into the looming shadows.

"We're..." Mulder began the introductions but stopped speaking when LaCroix raised up his arm to silence him.

"I know who you are, Agent Mulder. And I know why you are here."

"We are looking for someone. Do you know where she is?" Mulder quickly asked, hiding his surprise at LaCroix's words.

LaCroix stared at Scully for a moment, almost mesmerizing her with the piercing intensity of his look. "Come to me at the RAVEN. How do you Americans say it - at the witching hour? You may get some answers then." LaCroix almost vanished into the shadows, but he stepped back knowing that his every gesture was the focus of their heightened attentions. He turned to face them and added, "Bring my Nicolas." He then stepped backwards, into the black.

Mulder went after him but by the time he reached the church's door, LaCroix had disappeared.

"What did he mean?" Mulder demanded of Vachon.

"You are invited to a performance," Vachon darkly informed the annoying agent. But his smile was genuinely sympathetic as he looked at Scully. "Dana... may I call you Dana?"

She warily nodded, hiding her surprise that he knew her first name.

"Dana, LaCroix is a somewhat unusual radio personality here in Toronto. Some might say that he has a flair for the dramatic. However, there are some of us who consider him to have a predeliction for over-blown theatrics. He is also known as THE NIGHT CRAWLER, a name that you will find most apropos once you get to know him. He will be broadcasting to his brood from the RAVEN. Some would say that LaCroix is an unusual being, perhaps he is even demented."

"So what would you call him?" Mulder asked, not bothering to hide his growing alarm with the way this case was turning. And his disquiet with LaCroix's and Vachon's obvious interest in his partner.

"I believe that some would refer to him as an eccentric."

"He's wealthy, then?" Scully asked, striving to disregard Mulder's attitude.

"You could say that LaCroix's family rendered unto Caesar so Caesar rendered back, a very long time ago. He comes from old money - very old money."

Vachon moved close to Scully and grasped her right hand, kissing the back of it. "I will meet you at the RAVEN. I myself, am curious as to what LaCroix will discuss about Mademoiselle Vetter."

"Then you do admit to knowing Detective Vetter?" Mulder questioned.

"Does anyone really know anyone?" Vachon smoothly replied as he brought the pulse point on Scully's wrist up to his lips.

Mulder noticed that Scully wasn't trying to remove her hand from Vachon's grasp. "You never answered my question, Vachon."

Vachon stood up straight, finally releasing Scully's hand, not bothering to look at Mulder. "Which was?"

"What did LaCroix mean?"

Vachon ignored Mulder's questions, calling out instead, to someone else. "Screed. Come and show our visitors the way to the side door where there was a doorbell that you could have used." He slightly smiled at Scully. "That way has already been cleared where my restoration has begun. Screed ensures that the rat population does not take over."

And then, as if it were something that he did all the time, Vachon grabbed a rope and started climbing back up toward the vaulted ceiling.

"Well, that's one way to say that the conversation is finished," Mulder whispered to Scully as they waited for Screed (whomever or whatever that was) to show them the better way out of the church. "Did you notice..."

"Oh Agent Mulder..."

They looked up but couldn't see Vachon in the blackness. Even his poet's shirt was invisible.

"You wondered about my opinion of LaCroix," the disembodied voice continued, floating down toward them. "Well, some... myself included, consider him to be dangerous... perhaps even a deadly man..."

"Wonder..." Mulder stated to Scully as they waited for their escort. "Was that a threat or a warning?"

Moving toward a distant light, following it up a stone staircase now lit with the lights of many candles, they found themselves leaving through a newly-restored massive oak door by a rosette stained glass window. But they never did see their unknown guide.

"Well, that was an informative interview," Mulder remarked as he automatically opened up the driver's car door for himself, silently indicating that it was Scully's turn to brush the snow off of the windshields.

"Tracy Vetter knew Vachon..." Scully ruminated when she finished cleaning the windows and climbed into the car, dusting off her coat. "She also knows Nicolas Knight. And this LaCroix knows Nicolas as well. What does it all mean?"

"Assuming that LaCroix's invitation is extended to our Detective Knight, it means that this case just became a damned sight more interesting than it was a few hours ago." He started the car. "Now, there is only one question."

"And that is?" she asked as she pulled off her gloves. She should have known better.

"Should we have dinner at THE FILET OF SOLE or THE RED HOT TOMATO?"

She glared at him. "The real unsolved mystery to this case is how you can be eating so much and not gaining any weight."

Three hours later at the Royal York, Scully reviewed their messages.

"We've got some messages from Detective Knight as well as several requests for status reports from Commissioner Vetter, Mulder."

Mulder only nodded to indicate that he was listening to her as he walked about the living room of her suite to pull aside the blinds in order to stare at Toronto's night.

"Nicolas Knight will meet us at the RAVEN."

"Did he say anything about us wearing crosses?" Mulder turned and grinned over at her. "Oh, that's right. You always wear your lucky cross."

"I'm sure that we can call room service for some garlic cloves if you think that we'll need them for tonight."

His smile was gentle as he walked over to her, and picked up the cross hanging about her neck, fingering the tiny piece of gold most carefully. "No, we don't need any garlic, Scully. I'll just hide behind your back. For I have always considered this cross to be my good luck piece, too." He slowly lowered the pendant back to her neck, his fingers accidentally brushing up against her collar bone. For a moment the look in his eyes revealed to her what he wished for their future to one day be. And what he remembered of their past, including all of the pain and their losses. But there were also the good memories too. He could see in her eyes that she was reacting to his words. And to the sensation of his touch as well. "My good luck charm as long as you're wearing

it, that is..."

"Detective Knight left word that he will pick us up and take us to the RAVEN." She was finding it more difficult to maintain a purely professional attitude around Mulder, especially during this case.

"I think that we should take our own car..."

Scully arched an eyebrow. "Just in case Detective Knight becomes incapacitated?"

"Or arrested. All possibilities should be considered."

When they entered the RAVEN, Mulder stopped dead in the entrance. Even though the building looked the same, the atmosphere of the night club had been radically altered from the previous night. No longer were there teeming crowds of androgynous creatures with pierced body parts and clanking hardware gyrating to eardrum shattering rave music. Instead, some sort of dynamic chorale was being played over the sound system, but at a considerably subdued decibel level.

"O Fortuna, verlutt Luna, sta tu variabilis..."

Mulder paused to listen to the music. "CARMINA BURANA?" he muttered, almost to himself. "A classic composition about debauchery..." He glanced about the bar room and noticed some more of the atypical inhabitants. "The choice seems appropriate..."

"This is the place that you told me about?" Scully whispered, surprised at the discrepancy between Mulder's description and what she was seeing.

A soft voice other than Mulder's, answered her question from behind her back. "Mulder was here when the club was open to the public. Tonight, it hosts only invited guests."

Scully turned around and looked up at Knight who had arrived alone.

"Detective Knight, I believe that we have a lead concerning Tracy Vetter."

But before Knight could reply, a lady joined their group.

"Introduce me, Nicolas," she presumptively ordered, as she presented her hand to Mulder with a flourish.

"Janette, this is Agent Fox Mulder and Special Agent Dana Scully."

In Janette's eyes, Scully didn't exist. Every iota of her concentration was dedicated to Mulder. Mulder was bemused by her uninhibited attentions, noticing everything about this raven haired belle, dressed in the kind of slinky red dress that was sensual testimony to the genius of her couturier; the kind of evening gown that could enshrine the wearer in a man's memory forever.

"Fox..."

Mulder wasn't sure if she'd actually whispered his name or if he'd only imagined hearing his name spoken in the barest, sexiest of whispers. Whatever. But, strangely enough, he found himself drawn to her by some instinctive, internal, visceral response. Almost as if this classic mystery of a woman was compelling him to notice her.

She took several steps closer to Mulder, her hips swaying as if she were dancing to some inner song. She took Mulder's hand and clasped it, raising it closer to her lips. She moved with an innate animal grace that was almost hypnotic.

"No ring?" she asked, an innocent question that implied everything yet stated nothing. "No woman has captured your heart?"

"I..." Mulder only shook his head, almost dumbstruck, not quite capable of answering the woman truthfully.

"Janette, behave yourself," Knight suggested.

She still held on to Mulder's hand as she responded to her friend. "Nicolas, surely you know I've been looking forever for a man like this - someone I can really sink my teeth into..." She looked into Mulder's hazel eyes and sighed. "Someone with such an unsettled soul as yours... Someone who thinks that he needs to search forever for some of the answers that I might be able to provide..."

"Janette," Knight warned.

Mulder found his voice. "You think that I'm your type?"

"Oh yes," Janette cooed. "In many more ways that you can even imagine..." She cast a knowing wink toward Nicolas.

"How nice," was Dana's dry comment.

Suddenly it was turnabout on Mulder as another voice interrupted their conversation.

"I am giddy, expectations whirls me round. The imaginary relish is so sweet that it enchant's my senses..." [Shakespeare, TROILUS & CRESSIDA, III,iii,17]

This time it was Dana's hand that was captured, and her soft flesh was pressed against the lips of LaCroix. "How kind of you to accept my invitation, Miss Scully. I was so looking forward to your visit." For a brief second he cast an appreciative glance seemingly encompassing everything about Agent Scully from the crown of her brow, past her pale beige Pendleton pantsuit to the tips of her sensible flat heeled boots. He kissed her hand again, lingering for more than a moment.

"Permit me to show you my abode. And work place."

Dana didn't seem to mind Lacroix's words or his actions. The look in his eyes as he studied her again with such passionate intensity bordered on the mesmerizing. He resurrected certain emotions that had long been repressed.

For a drawn-out moment there was silence. Then Detective Knight remembered to ask, "You mentioned Tracy Vetter, Agent Scully?"

Natalie walked over to them catching this last statement.

"Nick, I have to talk to you about Tracy."

She placed her hand on his forearm, and squeezed it.

"What is it, Natalie?"

Dana spoke up quickly. "We discovered someone who might have seen Natalie the night that she disappeared. We found a jacket that we believe to be hers."

"Then you can return it to her," Natalie snipped. Natalie didn't like being interrupted. And she didn't care if her words sounded rude to anyone who had overheard them.

Dana ignored the woman's attitude as she concentrated on her statement. "You know where Tracy Vetter is?"

"Nick?"

"Natalie, answer the agent," Nick suggested.

"I just talked with Captain Reese. He had just talked to Tracy."

"Why didn't she call me?" Nick couldn't help but sound put out by his partner's behavior. He had his suspicions about what had happened to Tracy. And nothing that LaCroix or his entourage had done so far, had dispelled his fears. He knew LaCroix too well, not to know that something had happened. He just didn't know the specific details.

He looked at Natalie, absentmindedly noticing how pretty she looked in a soft pink and ivory sweater dress. He impatiently awaited her answer to his question, knowing that she would not tell him the absolute truth about everything since they were in mixed company, so to speak.

Natalie teasingly smiled as she reached over and pulled Nick's cordless phone out of his pocket. "Maybe if you hadn't left the phone 'on' while you were sleeping, the batteries would not have run down, and she might have been able to call you."

"Is she all right?" Nick didn't disguise his concern, as well as his confusion over Natalie's information.

"There seemed to be a significant amount of blood loss, as was indicated when her car was found," Dana added.

"Well," LaCroix interrupted, "I am sure that this Miss Vetter will provide suitable explanations at some time." He sent an almost apologetic look toward Nick. "Perhaps even tomorrow night." He then wrapped one arm around Dana's, gesturing with his other toward the main room to his establishment. "In the meanwhile, welcome to my humble establishment.." LaCroix motioned beyond the hanging curtain of iron link chains toward the bar and the wine cellar beyond. "Come. I can assure you that I have some very rare vintages amongst my collection. I would like to share them with you." He stared at Dana, as if to imply that his invitation was solely for her benefit.

"If Tracy Vetter has returned, then our business here is finished," Mulder informed their host. "I am sure that you have much better things to do - like your radio show," he suggested, as he pointedly stared at his partner.

"That will not be for hours yet, Agent Mulder." He tugged Dana's arm. "May I show you about, Miss Scully? I am sure that you have some questions

that you might wish to ask. I will provide certain answers. Even for the questions that you might not care to mention."

"Maybe we should leave," Mulder advised his partner.

"Oh, I am not going to let you get away without even a little sip," Janette informed Mulder, as she entwined herself about Mulder.

"Sip of what?" Scully mumbled under her breath. But she went with LaCroix.

"Mr. LaCroix..."

"Call me Lucius, Miss Scully." He bestowed upon her, what was for him, a reasonable attempt at a warm-blooded smile. The fact that LaCroix hadn't had a warm-blooded feeling in more than a millennium, didn't help his attempt at all.

"Mr. LaCroix..."

He interrupted her, brazenly lifting up his hand to trace her cheekbone with his finger. She did not withdraw, staring at him with only questions, not reactions, in her thoughts.

And then he reached over to entangle his fingers within the strands of her silken hair.

"Your hair..." He toyed with it for a moment. "...a forgotten sunrise..." He looked at her, smiling as if he had thoughts beyond her comprehension. "Glorious..." He dropped his hand, as if he were feeling a slight sense of regret for what had once been. "How long it has been since I have seen the flaming colors of a sunrise..."

"Lucius... You have a medical problem too? Like Detective Knight?" Dana Scully would find this fact if it were true, to be too much of a coincidence, even for a skeptical mind like hers.

"Oh no..." This time his sardonic sense of humor emerged. "I have not been diagnosed with any sickness for centuries. And as for what ails Detective Knight... Is that really your concern?"

Mulder's was almost stunned when Scully didn't retaliate. Instead, she dreamily asked, "Why haven't you seen a sunrise lately?"

"Because, my dear Agent Scully, I run a night club in order to maintain my standard of living. And I usually find myself retiring just before the sun is heralding its presence to the heavens." He dramatically sighed, indulging her careful nosiness into his affairs. His acquiescence when it came to Agent Scully was something others of his entourage would find quite astonishing. Most of them had never, ever referred to LaCroix as an accommodating, much less lenient master.

"Of course."

Dana looked about the RAVEN's wine cellar, vaguely wondered why so many things in this place were painted black, idly noted a white marble Roman bust that looked remarkably like their host, and tried to do everything possible to elude the inner voice that was telling her that LaCroix was somehow compelling her to look into his eyes. To be here. With him.

She tried to keep her thoughts from straying. "Are any of these wines Canadian? I have heard that there are some vineyards in southern Ontario."

He was amused by her attempts to disregard his influence.

"My dear lady, that is the information found only in tourist pamphlets. And not amongst those who actually drink. Perhaps in the new millennium, that is in your twenty-first century, there may be something that is palatable that will be produced in this area of Ontario. But only when the forewarned global warming actually occurs and the grapes have a chance to bask in the sunlight for more than a few chilly months a year. And that the soil isn't from the chateaus at the Cote de Baune. But not just yet."

Mulder thought that LaCroix sounded like an overstuffed armchair critic who had attended far too many wine tastings.

LaCroix reached up and careful removed a bottle from one of the storage sections. He blew the accumulated dust of quite a few years off of it.

"Perhaps I could tempt you with a bottle of Batard-Montrachet? I believe that it is a most respectable pinot noir."

From the doorway to the wine cellar, Mulder announced, "I am sorry Mr. LaCroix, but we do not drink when we are on a case."

"Pity," Janette drawled. "I would have liked a chance to see if you are even more

interesting when the ambrosia of gods sing in your veins... Fox..."

Dana took in the way that Janette was cleaving to Mulder. She observed the way that Mulder wasn't objecting to the Canadian version of static cling. She also heard Janette's sibilant pronunciation of her partner's first name, which was quite a strange accomplishment when she considered the way that Fox spelled his name. Then she turned and conferred upon LaCroix her friendliest, warmest, most personal smile. Dana was rewarded with LaCroix's look, apparently comprehending everything about her. And her relationship with her partner.

Even though Mulder seemingly had his arms full, he noticed Scully's curious behavior.

In order to counter the effects of Janette's presence Scully mentioned to her partner, "You're wrong. We are no longer on duty, Agent Mulder. It seems that the Toronto Police were able to solve this case after all without our help. So, Mr. LaCroix..."

Mulder would have sworn that Dana batted her eyes at the man.

"... I'd love a glass of your respectable wine."

As Mulder contemplated his partner's actions, his personal cellular phone rang.

"Mulder here."

A moment later he was grinning at his partner as he signed off the call.

"Guess what, Scully."

She snubbed her partner for a moment, focusing her attentions exclusively on what LaCroix was doing. He handed her a superbly cut, exquisite stemmed crystal goblet, a relic that had survived Lacroix's fin de siecle debauchery days. Dana carefully grasped the goblet, delighted with its delicacy, intuitively knowing that it was a symbolic representation of another more gracious, by-gone era. Of a time that was of importance to her host.

"Baccarat," he remarked, pleased that she understood the need for one to have the continuity of beauty in one's life. "From a time when artistry was a true gift gratefully appreciated, and not just an advertising slogan disguising the pervasiveness of mass mediocrity." He poured some more of the rare wine into the mate to Dana's goblet, and lifted it, almost touching the rim to his lips.

"A toast?" he suggested.

"Long life..." Dana quickly replied.

LaCroix was amused by her choice of phrase. "A votre sante..."

He watched as Dana appreciatively sniffed the goblet of pinot noir and then took a small taste of it, letting the flavors play over her tongue.

It wasn't until Mulder tapped her on the shoulder that she even realized that her partner had come over to the bar.

"What, Mulder?"

"That was Commissioner Vetter."

"Ave! Commissioner Vetter," LaCroix muttered to himself.

"And?" Scully continued as she took another sip of a remarkable wine.

In the old J. Edgar Hoover days at the FBI, even fellow agents or congressmen on unlimited lobbyist expense accounts, had never tasted a wine as fine as this one. It had surprising, hidden depths. Just like the man who had poured it. Dana was intrigued. And annoyed by Mulder's continuing grin.

Mulder's grin took a turn toward the naughty as he moved even closer to Scully. "Our return plane flight has been arranged for Monday morning. Until then, we are Commissioner Vetter's guests." Mulder shook his arm loose from Janette. "And Commissioner Vetter has already cleared this with D.A. Skinner."

"Wonderful," sighed Janette. "We have the next three nights in which I can try to persuade you to stay, my cute little Agent Mulder."

Mulder considered Janette's words and unspoken invitation. "Well, if you only want my nights, then I can take Agent Scully to Casa Loma during the days."

"Or go to the Royal Ontario Art Museum," Scully hastily stated, momentarily forgetting about LaCroix's presence.

Conversation stopped when from the outer bar area, the noise of crashing, breaking glass

was heard.

"What the..." LaCroix muttered, as he rushed past Scully to see who or what had done what to his bar.

Nicolas stood there, a broken bottle of cabernet at his feet, spreading its now-liberated liquid into a dark red flower pattern.

"Nicolas!" LaCroix commanded.

At first Nicolas looked as if he were struck dead from shock. And then he turned and stared at LaCroix, accusations hiding behind his icecold glare. It seemed as if he had been utterly betrayed by this man who had been as a father to him during the passage of the centuries.

And Nicolas also appeared as if he were a man who had been tragically deceived by the man whom he had once considered to be his absolute, best friend. What Tracy Vetter had just done to him was insignificant. Her transgression paled in comparison to the magnitude of the sin that was now revealed before him.

"Schenke!"

Schenke's name was stated with no visible emotion, as Nick tried to reconcile the joy and anguish that were his feelings, as he stared at his now animated former partner.

"Nick."

Schenke said his partner's name just the way that he used to do so, in the time before he had been lost in a plane crash. Schenke had a pretty good idea of what Nick was going through. His wife had displayed a similar expression the first time he'd let her know that he was still alive - so to speak.

"You shoulda' told me, Nick. You shoulda' trusted me."

Suddenly mindful that there were mortals in their midst, Nicolas asked the obvious. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Niagra-on-the-Lake."

It was such a mundane sounding answer.

Nicolas was stunned for a second. "What? Where?"

"I was staying with some newfound friends in a place that could have passed for hell. They sort of taught this old dog some new tricks." Schenke chuckled. "I've been studying to be a theatre critic. You know Nick, I sort of like the night life, now that I know that there is nothing new..." His eyes twinkled as he added, "...under the sun."

Knight suddenly realized that Schenke **knew**. Knew everything. He really recognized Nick's deepest secrets for he now shared them first hand. And Nick no longer had to keep such information from his friend.

Nick stood still, remembering how he'd first met Schenke. Why he had used his unearthly abilities in order to influence, to ensure that Schenke would be the man chosen to be his partner. And what it had taken for his formerly lost partner to turn a vampire-who-wanted-to-become-mortal-again into a good detective.

"Nicolas!"

Everyone turned to look at LaCroix. The man could become the center of attention whenever he wished. He had that sort of dramatic ability to command instant obedience by his voice alone.

"LaCroix - you knew?" Nick was not pleased with this possibility.

"Your long-lost friend was a guest of Vachon," LaCroix, explained as he looked over at Dana. "Would you please take your reunion with your friend to some place more private? This is supposed to be a soiree, remember. **My** affair. Not yours." He pointed toward the exit. "Now, be gone."

And they did, leaving without a whimper of protest.

Mulder whispered into Scully's ear, distracting her. "Did he just say 'be gone'?"

"Be quiet!"

"Careful, Scully. Now you're beginning to sound like our pompous host too. Don't you think that it's time for us to 'be gone', too?"

"And be doing what?"

Mulder considered answering Scully's question with complete honesty, but he had a feeling

that she was not in the mood to appreciate such truthfulness at the moment.

Dana shook her head, trying to make sense of this whole situation. Now that she no longer was the focus of LaCroix's undiluted attention, her senses were beginning to clear. She ascribed the strange feelings that she had been having in LaCroix's presence to the headiness of the wine that she had been drinking. And to the weirdness of this case. For a while it had seemed as if she had been meeting would-be vampires everywhere they went at night.

One moment they had been desperately searching for a young woman in a life-or-death situation. And now, Mulder was telling her they had time to relax. To sight-see.

Scully didn't like trying to unwind when Mulder was around. When they weren't together on a case, she found it near impossible to be with the man without thinking improper thoughts...

"Mulder, that man was at Tracy Vetter's apartment..."

"Come along, Scully," he said as he tugged. "Tata, LaCroix," was what Dana thought she heard her partner say as he was leading her away from LaCroix and out into the frigid night.

LaCroix merely nodded, as he permitted them to leave his presence. For the moment.

*

"Eh?"

"Captain Reese?"

Scully sent a quick glance over at her partner who had been in such a strange mood most of the night, to see if he was still paying attention. She also thought that she could still smell traces of the exotic perfume that Janette used, clinging to his jacket. Her determination hardened.

"I would like to speak with Tracy Vetter in order to make sure that she really is all right."

"Eh... Er... Nothing will make Tracy Vetter completely all right..." Reese mumbled under his breath. But when he formally responded, he was the picture of an affronted police captain whose veracity had been tacitly questioned.

"Agent Scully, Tracy Vetter is back where she belongs. Any further inquiries into the incident will be dealt with by the proper authorities. That is, my authority."

Scully slowly nodded, understanding his defense of territory. Whether or not she approved of it was another matter entirely. Knowing that they truly did have no further business here, she stood, and extended her hand.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Captain Reese." She slightly smiled. "I am glad that this matter was resolved without injury." She paused, and decided to forego pleasantries, and ask what was still on her mind. "But what about the blood, Sir?"

"According to Dr. Lambert, the blood in her car was the result of a minor head wound."

Dana could tell by the captain's attitude that their business was now concluded. She was about to leave when she observed a group photo on the wall. "The man in that photograph, with Detective Knight. Who is he, Captain Reese?"

Reese glanced over his shoulder and answered, "Nick's former partner, Schenke. Why?"

"Oh, no matter Sir.

"Goodbye Sir, and thank you."

*

The RAVEN was quiet now, with only two old friends sitting in the darkness. A few candles cast shadows upon the angular planes to the faces of the two men.

"What now, Nicolas?"

Nicolas slowly sipped his drink before he answered LaCroix's question. "Schenke wants me to be his teacher."

"You would be a good magister, Nicolas. You could have guided many more across if you had not been afraid of your inclination to drink too much."

"LaCroix..." Nick sighed, thinking of what he had done to Alyssa, his long-dead wife. LaCroix was correct in his judgment of Nick's fears.

"Vachon will take Tracy away for a while until she learns how to be one of us..."

"...in a vampire unfriendly world..." Nick finished the thought for LaCroix. "Perhaps our dark powers will give Trace enough strength to finally deal with her father."

"Though I do not believe that Vachon would be anyone's ideal eternal mate much less for an overly-loved daughter."

"I wonder if Tracy will confess to her father that she is a vampire," Nick mused. "I think I'd actually like to be a bat in the belfry for that conversation."

"Nicolas..."

"What, LaCroix?"

"After all that you have revealed to me about the woman, as well as my unpleasant encounter with her, I cannot imagine anyone willingly spend eternity with Tracy Vetter as a constant companion."

"Well, only Vachon can supply the answer to that question."

"And as for Schenke?"

"We will be gone for a while whilst I tutor him. And then, his wife is willing to relocate in order to try and lead a more normal life with her husband."

"And Schenke agrees to this?"

"If anyone can live the suburban dream as a vampire, it will be Schenke."

"Nicolas, I do not wish to one day learn of a talk show where Schenke's teenage children confess that their daddy is a blood-sucking monster." LaCroix shuddered in mock horror, his shoulders moving slightly. "If that should occur, then they will truly know my wrath."

Nicolas smiled at this thought. "And what of you, LaCroix?"

"Meaning?"

"You seemed interested in that red haired agent."

"Ah, yes. Miss Scully. She could be a remarkable vampire one day. Perhaps I will bring her across." On Nicolas' questioning look he added, "But not just yet. The lady has a great sense of purpose which our kind cannot embrace. A pity that I could not tell her the truth. Just yet. I sensed a need in her to believe in the existence of something beyond the 'real' world. But, Janette has the more pressing need of my company at the moment. She did not want you to bring her across again, when she died, Nicolas. She is still angry with you."

"I had noticed, LaCroix."

LaCroix lifted up his goblet and clinked it against his friend's crystal rim. "Ah well, Long life, my friend..."

*

"Well, say it, Scully."

She looked up from her laptop, glanced down the aisle to see if a flight attendant would be coming any time soon with the beverage cart, and then pretended that she hadn't heard his words.

"You are not going to admit that you had fun this weekend, are you?"

"I had a pleasant time. I will admit to that, Mulder."

"Wasn't that Eaton Mall something?"

She looked at him over the rim of her glasses. "Mulder, you bought a present for your mother at the very first store we entered, and then spent the rest of the time asking me if it was time to go."

"But Scully, I bought a tie, too!" He fingered the 'Portraits of Larry, Moe and Curly' printed in grey, maroon and black silk about his neck.

"Now," she glanced down at her screen, "if you would rather type this report for Skinner, then be my guest. Otherwise, leave me in peace in order to get it done."

"Well, you are so much better at filling the pages of a report with unimportant details

than I am, so go right ahead, Scully." He leaned back into his seat and adjusted the window cover to block out the sun. "Wake me when the good-looking flight attendant comes by with our peanuts."

Scully did, when the George Clooney look-alike asked if she'd like something to drink.

Hours later they were in a holding pattern over Washington, D.C., when Mulder observed a change in Scully.

"What is it, Scully?"

"What?" She looked up from her laptop and her reports, trying to make sense of what it was that she was reading.

"You have that look."

"What look?"

Mulder grinned. "That look you get when you have just discovered that I might be right about something and you don't want to tell me."

The look she bestowed upon him was easy to interpret. It was one of pure exasperation.

His grin broadened. "Damn, I am right!" He leaned closer to her and conspiratorially whispered, "What is it, Scully? You can tell me - I am your trustworthy partner, remember?"

She sighed out loud. And then she admitted, "Schenke."

"Who?"

"The man with whom Detective Knight had the reunion in the RAVEN."

"So?"

"According to the official police reports..."

"Scully?"

"He's dead."

"A walking dead man. I knew that there was more to this case than what we uncovered. Think he was a vampire? Shall we turn right around and investigate?"

"No doubt the report of Detective Schenke's death was arranged by the Toronto Police High Command. It's their business."

"You're probably right." Mulder leaned over and slid up his window shade, looking out into more clouds. "Think we'll just circle until we run out of fuel?"

"Mulder!" she warned.

A few minutes later, just as their landing was delayed once again, Mulder quietly remarked, "Remember Vachon's home?"

"The church?"

"Remember what we found there?"

"Tracy Vetter's leather jacket and some rats."

"Well, Scully, I found a bit more than that."

"What, Mulder?" There were times when Scully sounded like a long-suffering soul, plagued by her own perpetual demon. This was one of those times.

"A wine cooler bottle."

"I would have thought that even you wouldn't drink that stuff. Besides, isn't scotch your preference?"

"Why Scully, I never knew that you noticed." He stretched and then reached for her bag of honey roasted peanuts. "Vachon didn't seem to be the type to drink pink papaya passion, so it must have been Tracy Vetter's bottle."

"Are we going somewhere with this, Mulder?"

"I slipped the bottle into my coat."

"What on earth for?"

"I had the contents of the bottle analyzed."

"You really did have too much time on your hands during this case, Mulder."

"I got the report this morning, Scully. Someone had left the results with our hotel messages, and I didn't bother collecting them until we were checking out of the Royal York."

"And?" She sounded like she was going through one of those 'trying times' with Mulder at the moment.

"There were traces of blood inside the wine cooler bottle."

"That sounds like the title of a country western song."

"I am serious, Scully. That bottle had blood in it. Type O+ to be precise."

"I don't even want to think about it, Mulder."

Mulder looked out his window, watching the clouds roll by before he agreed. "You might be right, Scully. This is one case I don't think that we should ever even think about. We're not going to get any answers that won't disturb your sanity."

"Correct, Mulder."

"At least, we won't get any answers that you would want to hear..." He motioned toward the flight steward who was nearing their row with the beverage cart.

If she could have hit him she would have... It was either that or kiss him. And neither choice was acceptable according to the FBI Agent's field manual.

"Think I'll get a drink. I'll even treat you to one, Scully."

It had been a long flight. "Okay, Mulder."

His smile broadened as he ordered, "Two Bloody Marys, please." He recognized the expression on Scully's face. "Or would you prefer a Zombie?"

At this moment, Scully didn't feel like kissing him.

THE END

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BABBLE ON on Margaret A. Basta

About two months ago, I suggested to my sister, "Let's do a fanzine!" She of course, in her infinite wisdom and experience, as well as knowing that she had only three other zines to get ready for MEDIA WEST, knew better and only wrote one short story for this zine, "The Girl with Catfish Eyes". It is a wicked little tale, at her best.

As for the other works in this zine, well my thanks to Nancy Nivling and Jayne Largent for their contributions.

The "NIGHT, KNIGHT" story was written before the final episode of FOREVER KNIGHT aired, though it seems that I was thinking along the same lines as the writers for that wonderful, weird little show.

And as for "A Voice in the Darkness", well, it relates back to the STAR TREK THE NEXT GENERATION episode "Inner Light". I have been told that what I wrote is impossible. But then, so was the whole premise of "Inner Light". And isn't the impossible the point of Fanzines?

If anyone would like to contribute to eXotica No.2, please write to me. Or at least write, and let me know what you think about it. **LIVE LONG AND PROSPER.**